AALBORG UNIVERSITY

"I don't tell them who I'm voting for, but they know"

How is the interplay of personal mindset with gender-related political mandates shaping teachers' performed professional identities and practices in France and Germany?

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I'm a Teacher
I am what I
Teach.
(NOT REALLY)

ABSTRACT

Finding its origin in the debate about the recent bans on gender inclusive writing in France and Germany, this paper explores the intersection of personal beliefs and political mandates in the practices of teachers regarding matters of gender. This research is situated at the intersection of the field of educational and gender studies and investigates the following problem: How is the interplay of personal mindset with political mandates shaping teachers' performed professional identities and practices in France and Germany?

At the methodological core, the social constructionist and interpretivist approach gives language central importance in the research and adds a particular focus on the discourse of teachers. To implement a comparative analysis between the cases of France and Germany, six secondary school teachers from each country were interviewed following a semi-structured style. These conversations were held in the research participants' respective native languages of either French or German in order to facilitate the process of acquiring detailed data. The interviews were then transcribed, translated, and analyzed according to the coding methods of qualitative content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis.

Here, the common thread in the theoretical framework is the Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony which is present through all conceptual notions involved in the making of this study. This includes the political influence on education with the ambition of neutrality, the ongoing construction of gender through society, the constant negotiation of both private and professional identity in an interplay with the social sphere, and its performed expression through language.

Starting with more concrete practical matters before moving on to abstractions on a reflexive level, our analysis covers the categories of (1) Positioning the Teachers in their Professional Environment, (2) Being a Teacher means Teaching in Practice, (3) Exploring Inclusive Language Practices in the Classroom, (4) Exercising Agency as a Teacher and Civil Servant, (5) Understanding the Role of the Teacher, and (6) The Individuality behind the Profession. The results from the analysis reveal the existence of a collective

teachers' identity, constituted by the interplay of personal mindset with political mandates. Strong sense of duty and the best interest of the students are the main characteristics of this stature, which is continuously defined and redefined through performance inside and outside the classroom. Identities and pedagogical performances are thus formed in close partnership between students and teachers.

While the findings highlight the inertia characterizing change in the educational field making political mandates not always achieve their desired influence on classroom practices, this carries ambivalent implications in practice. The heterogeneous identity of the teachers' group protects democracy by not being subjected to specific party ideologies, and by performing and reproducing shared democratic values, as it offers a counter-power to shifting governments in France and Germany. In conclusion, this research examines the influence of teachers' agency on policy implementation, contributing to the assessment of possibilities to regulate the educational field from a political standpoint.

Keywords: Agency, Democracy, Education, Gender, Hegemony, Identity, Performance, Politics, Teachers

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION

"Inclusive writing disturbs the way the French language is learned and passed on. [...] By placing the focus on the obsession with gender, it restricts the relationship with language by inhibiting a broader expression of thought"[1] (Académie Française, n.d.). This open letter endorsed Blanquer's, at the time French Minister of Education, mandate to implement a ban on the use of certain forms of inclusive writing in French schools in May 2021. As a result, a teachers' union immediately urged its members to disregard this directive, and alternatively detailed the daily difficulties faced by teachers and school staff in a critical period, calling out the government for a lack of action in this matter (*Circulaire Blanquer Contre L'écriture Inclusive*…, n.d.). Two years later, this discussion spilled over into the neighboring country of Germany, where Joachim Herrmann, the minister of the interior in the federal state of Bavaria, proclaimed an upcoming ban on gender inclusive language in a press release, saying that: "Gender inclusive language disfigures the German language in an unlawful and completely unnecessary way" (*Innenminister Joachim Herrmann*…, 2023).[2] In response to this, a press release published by the Council for German Spelling made the rounds: "Schools are the place where orthographic norms are taught. Students still have to learn the written German language, which is not without its difficulties" (*Geschlechtergerechte Schreibung*…, 2023).[3] They see the responsibility for legal action with state officials. And legal measures were taken… Half a year later, the German state of Bavaria enacted a ban on gender inclusive writing in public

[1] "L'écriture inclusive trouble les pratiques d'apprentissage et de transmission de la langue française. [...] En focalisant l'attention sur l'obsession du genre, elle restreint le rapport à la langue en inhibant une expression plus ample de la pensée."

[2] "Das 'Gendern' verunstalte regelwidrig und völlig unnötig die deutsche Sprache."

[3] "Die Schule ist der Ort der Vermittlung der orthographischen Normen. Die geschriebene deutsche Sprache ist von Schülerinnen und Schülern erst noch zu lernen, was nicht ohne Schwierigkeiten ist."

institutions such as schools, to which Herrmann added: "Any linguistic artificiality or tendency towards linguistic education should be avoided" (*Herrmann…*, 2024).[4]

Educational institutions appear here to be a stage of highly disputed conflicts. Politicians often seek to impose their values and agendas on educational institutions, with varying degrees of success and resistance from educators and the public (Young, 2009, pp. 16-17). This issue has been raised around the world, with continuous shifts in the governance of educational institutions, from local to federal, and elected boards to appointed politicians (Katz & Rose, 2013, p. 209; Zhou & Zhang, 2023, p. 275). The highest point of tension usually occurs around election periods, which are also a game of planning and anticipating for politicians to maintain their existence on the (inter)national stage, timing their actions around their campaign agenda more than the people who could be influenced by it (Cassette & Farvaque, 2014, p. 165). A new focus on the youth can be observed, resulting from their identification as a group with significant power. Political participation and behaviors can be characterized as strongly impacted by inertia and persistence (Condon & Holleque, 2013, p. 167), giving a special importance to the first moments in the political life of an individual. A young person's decision to take action in the political sphere would result in higher chances for this same individual to keep participating in later stages of their life (Condon & Holleque, 2013, p. 167; Jones-Bodie, 2016, p. 57), and tend to preserve a positive opinion of their earlier choices of candidates, as theorized with the principle of cognitive dissonance (Mullainathan & Washington, 2009, p. 88). In recent years, there is a certain 'peopolization' of said politicians and leaders (Camille-Delahaye, 2023, p. 5). By changing the outlook on politics from a very formal setting historically to a 'personification' of political figures, the barrier between private and public is becoming blurry. And this is not simply a question of appearance, but also of substance.

With the notorious sentence "the intimate is political" (Fetner, 2022, p. 441), the concept of gender invites itself onto the political stage and is the foundation of

[4] "Dabei ist jedoch jede sprachliche Künstlichkeit oder spracherzieherische Tendenz zu vermeiden."

numerous debates and interrogations on how to approach this 'sensitive' topic. Gender became a sensitive topic in the academic world because of its potential for controversy in the public and media sphere (Butler, 2024, p. 5). This ongoing debate is rooted in the omnipresence of gender in all aspects of society (Lorber, 1994, p. 13; Ivinson & Murphy, 2007, p. 6), deeply ingrained in personal narratives, and embedded in the core of the development of each individual's identity. The universal nature of gender in the human experience makes it seem approachable to everyone, and with this, qualifies everyone to express an expert opinion. Because we believe words have an impact on how people interact with their surroundings (Talja et al., 2005, p. 89), we regard the accuracy in the use of vocabulary about gender as decisive in addressing this topic precisely. Therefore, we consider gender not to be controversial, but sensitive in nature, "calling for tact, care, or caution in treatment" (*Sensitive*, n.d.). These preoccupations regarding gender are also manifested within the juridical world, where discrimination against any minority cannot be qualified as a 'contradictory opinion' but is legally reprimandable (*International Covenant on civil and political rights, Art. 26*, 1967, p. 13). In both France and in Germany, equal treatment of individuals, which includes the question of gender, is considered to be a fundamental human right (*Constitution du 4 octobre 1958*, 1958 ; *Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, n.d). As an example, signing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is urging countries to "leave no one behind", including girls and women, and UNESCO insists on the idea that gender inequality takes many different guises which should all be addressed (*Global Education Monitoring Report…, Foreword*, 2018). In order for policies about gender to come into effect in the classroom, there must be teachers translating them into educational practices (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 110), which we understand as actions taking place in the classroom.

This is, however, where a level of discrepancy comes into play, since teachers are not part of the legislative decision making (Shieh, 2023, p. 14). The decision-making process that detaches itself from the purely instructional but serves a more global agenda. It has been observed that this conception of education

does not allow reforms to be effective and efficient in terms of academia, as "distracting credentials, titles, and agenda-pushing partnerships" cannot replace invaluable and real teaching experience (Stralek & Papa, 2020, p. 147; Cassette & Farvaque, 2014, p. 165). There is a "distance between principles and outcome" (Mattei, 2012, p. 86) which is created in such instances. Two examples of linguistic and topical regulations in the past can illustrate this idea, such as the 1996 German orthography reform which to this day is being rejected by teachers (Feiereisen, 2018, pp. 307-308, 319, 322-324; Johnson, 2000, p. 107) and the attempt to implement the 'ABCD de l'égalité' in France in 2013, a program for teaching about gender in schools, which met vigorous resistance before being abandoned (Salle, 2019, p. 21). If it is possible for governments to create and organize what should be taught in schools, there are no guarantees that these processes will run smoothly. Teachers play a significant role, and are the "engine and oil in the whole educational process" (Fauziah et al., 2021, p. 546). The 'status' of teachers is constantly undermined by a multiplicity of factors, ranging from difficult working conditions to a lack of recognition by governmental entities (Global Report on the Status of Teachers, 2021) and the general public with national variations (Akiba et al., 2023, pp. 3-4).

In a literal sense, 'teaching' is the act of providing instruction and knowledge (*Teach*, n.d.), an activity encompassed in the field of pedagogy (*Pedagogy*, n.d.). In order to fully grasp the scale of what is expected of teachers on paper, we decided to go back to the definition of the term 'pedagogue'. Finding its roots in ancient Greek, a pedagogue is the one 'leading the children' to school, from *pais*, "child" and *agōgos* "leader". This was historically a masculine activity, for both teachers and students (Danilova, 2019, p. 110), which is now widely feminized with 82% of women in primary and 63% middle schools on average for OECD countries (*OECD Report*, 2021). This shift in gender ratio brought on an inversion of stereotypical gender roles and a new awareness to the gender parameter in schooling throughout patriarchal societies such as the ones in France and Germany. This correlates with a similar transformation of teachers' roles and expectations, with an advanced emphasis on educating beyond textbook

knowledge and including matters of social conduct. With this, gender is now also questioned as potential content in educational settings with particular pedagogical material and attention (Rogers, 2016, p. 147). Teaching the youth about the topic of gender, treating it as a culturally anchored concept, and addressing gender related inequalities can help reduce sexism and gender inequality (Farvid, 2019), which would have the potential to change societies and people's wellbeing regardless of their gender. In this sense, teachers have the opportunity and obligation to be "moral examples and models" to their students (Osguthorpe, 2008, p. 288), with the advantage of being "physically close role-models" (Brownhill et al., 2021, p. 647) bearing more similarities to each other. Brownhill et al. (2021) note the special importance placed on gender-matching in these dynamics, despite the androgynous nature of the main qualities typically emulated, such as kindness or reliability (p. 648), which parallels the central preoccupation with gender in a society of 'cis-heteronormativity' (Brito et al., 2021, p. 384).

Teachers' identities are best identified through their practices, and their understanding of self is strongly shaped by "historical, cultural, social, and critical factors" (Derakhshan et al., 2024, p. 3). By relying on the idea that "good teaching requires a teacher to be knowledgeable in content, skilled in method, and virtuous in disposition and character" (Osguthorpe, 2008, p. 288), we understand the complexity surrounding teachers. They are at the intersection of numerous solicitations, embracing, with varying degrees of approval, the role of a State's actor who "disseminate the State's ideology" (Brandt, 2021, p. 546) while it might clash with their personal allegiances (Lopes Cardozo & Shah, 2016, p. 331). Despite these potential differences and opposing individual beliefs, teachers are obliged to provide the youth with a tolerant education and to establish correct communication with parents, colleagues and students with diverse backgrounds (Knežević, 2023, p. 4). Similarly, there is a consensus on the idea that education, and more specifically in school, is not limited to getting students ready for work, but has much broader advantages in terms of personal, social and economic enrichment (Walsh, 2016, p. 102) without ever acknowledging the political ties this may necessarily have.

Putting this into perspective, we observe a strong interconnection between education, gender and politics, intricately intertwined within a gray area of tension between private and public spheres. These three building blocks guiding our research stand in relation to one another through the tool and binding agent of language (see Figure 2). In an ever-evolving and increasingly politicized and globalized world, we consider modernization and interculturality in academia crucial in addressing gaps and newly emergent themes in research and ensuring a better understanding of phenomena which cannot be limited to a singular country. Therefore, we situate our study within the research field of educational studies, where we place our focus on diversity and inclusion and as seen through the lens of gender in our cross-national case of France and Germany. The inconsistency between ideas and practices we detail here leads us to the following problem formulation:

How is the interplay of personal mindset with political mandates shaping teachers' performed professional identities and practices in France and Germany?
How does their use of language in the classroom compare in conveying personal political perspectives around the topic of gender?
To what extent do they meet the expectations of neutrality they are subjected to as civil servants?

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Individual experiences in the classroom from the perspective of a specific set of teachers are at the center of this thesis paper. We believe that every member of our participant group yielded a varying set of answers to our interview questions due to differing social backgrounds. Looking at this plurality of opinions from a philosophical view, our stance towards the reality of the social world is informed by constructionist ontology, allowing for a multiplicity of realities (Blaikie, 2019, pp. 101-102; Porta & Keating, 2008, pp. 21, 23-24; Talja et al., 2005, p. 89). We arrive at such conclusions about subjective realities and flexible standpoints from the way we see these three intermingling factors: Policies are governing manifestations of normatively institutionalized realities that collide with certain practical realities in the social world and are then made sense of by the individual teachers (Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 35). The common denominator among them is the language which we see as constitutive of social realities and thus, "for the construction of selves and the formation of meanings" (Talja et al., 2005, p. 89). When social actors such as teachers interact through the means of language and convey knowledge, they communicate based on the conditions of their identity construction and thus reflect the power relations in them (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 128; Talja, 2005, p. 90). In our research, we turn a critical eye to the contextual way "language in use" (Talja et al., 2005, p. 90) produces a lack of neutrality in social interactions and seek to shed light on social inequalities (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 128). This process of intersubjective interpretation of the world by the teachers aligns with our own interpretivist epistemological approach to our study and to the aforementioned individual social realities (Blaikie, 2019, pp. 109; Bryman, 2012, p. 30). Interpretivism allows us to understand and to generate context-driven knowledge about the social world by deriving findings from the knowledge and meaning created by our interviewees as social actors (Porta & Keating, 2008, pp.

21, 23). Acknowledging the hermeneutical origin of our epistemological decision lets us fully grasp the importance of the perspective that our research participants are conveying and the social context they are situated in (Bryman, 2012, p. 560). As a guiding principle for our own interpretation of their meaning-making processes, hermeneutics complements our views on the collaborative construction of social realities through individual sense-making (Bryman, 2012, p. 560; Talja et al., 2005, p. 89).

When putting these ontological and epistemological considerations into the context of our research procedure, data collection precedes the analysis of the interview transcripts and the emerging "meanings used in social theories" (Blaikie, 2019, p. 109; Porta & Keating, 2008, pp. 64-65). As our study highlights the lived experiences and describes the practices of individuals over general societal phenomena or patterns, the findings from our data dictated the theoretical lens we later took on (Blaikie, 2019, pp. 117-118). Therefore, we make our scientific inferences by following the principle of inductive research (Bryman, 2012, pp. 5-6, 19, 24-26; Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 64-65). Our philosophy of science acts as the supportive groundwork to our subjective and deeply individual problem at hand, which deals with teacher identity and performativity.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In light of seeking to deeply understand individual teaching practices from the angle of gender under the influence of national legislations, we opted to design our qualitative research in a comparative manner (Bryman, 2012, p. 72). According to Bartlett & Vavrus (2016), this approach is "particularly well-suited to social research about practice and policy" (p. 1) due to its ability to dissect socially constructed conventions and their limitations. When applied to the matter of our research, the school as an institution is a stage where structures of power intersect. What stands out in the comparative design is the use of similar cases and their equal analytical treatment by way of identical methods (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016, pp. 7, 27; Bryman, 2012, p. 72). This encouraged the inductive, cumulative and contextual way in which we reflected on our data and strengthened our line of argumentation which guided us throughout our process of "theory building" (Bryman, 2012, p. 74; Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 13). We chose to construct our research in the shape of a cross-sectional (Bryman, 2012, p. 59) and cross-national, multiple-case study marked by variations in culture and policy (Bryman, 2012, p. 72; Liamputtong, 2020, pp. 211, 214). More specifically, we consider two countries within the European Union, which is built on a common legislation entailing a collective set of democratic values (*EU law*, n.d.), and from there, we focus on the cases of teachers in Germany and France. In doing so, we chose not to simply focus on the causes of likenesses and contrasts between the two nations. We decided to elevate our abstractions through a bigger picture of teacher's identity negotiations in the European Union with the objective of "gain[ing] a greater awareness and deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts" (Bryman, 2012, p. 72; Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 13). The comparative aspect therefore functions as support in order to fill a certain gap which is necessary in this type of expandable research.

Embracing a design relying on principles of qualitative data comparison comes with limitations regarding the levels of generalizability (Bryman, 2012, p. 75). We counterbalance this by choosing to focus on individual pedagogical

practices which therefore do not need to have the ambition to be directly universal. Where qualitative design loses in scope it wins in depth, flexibility and context (Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 20).

RESEARCH CRITERIA

While conducting qualitative research, it is necessary for us researchers to ensure its quality and worth for the readers. These "values for quality" are, according to Tracy (2010), "everchanging and situated" in specific contexts (p. 837). For this purpose, even if they have been criticized by numerous scholars, defined criteria are useful (Tracy, 2010, p. 838) to establish a framework in which the research can be situated. This is evidence of the good quality of the research, and can also help to expand its impact outside of the academic field. This is especially important in a project involving and seeking to reach political actors, since playing by their rules and having a similar set of values within a frame of reference might participate to "make scholarship [more] powerful". (Tracy, 2010, p. 838).

Bryman (2012) defines three criteria which we will use here as a lens to evaluate the value of this research: reliability, replication and validity (p. 46). Tracy (2010, p. 839) identifies eight markers of high quality qualitative research, "(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence". We decided in this project to combine the conceptualizations of both Bryman and Tracy in order to ensure the quality of our research. This helped us to develop a more comprehensive, balanced framework and a broader perspective. Stepping back, Anderson (2017) qualifies this evaluation of research as the demonstration of a necessary "rigor" in qualitative work. The first argument they both mention is the idea of rigor and reliability (Tracy, 2010; Bryman, 2012, p. 46), as essential in qualitative research. We focus here on the external reliability, with the involvement of two researchers for each step of the process (Bryman, 2012, p. 390), which, in addition to the preferred mixed-methods, offers a solid ground for triangulation (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545). Also, with the exception of different nationalities, both of our positionalities regarding the researched topic are highly similar in terms of age, gender, race and education, making the comparison between the two sets of interviews well-founded and credible. Reliable research is also easier to replicate, and with this makes it more credible and enhances its

validity. Credibility is the term used to address "the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility" of our results (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). This is achieved through a set of practices and considerations, for theoretical decisions as well as a more hands-on analysis level. Tracy puts an emphasis on the idea of "thick description" (2010, p. 843), which refers to the acknowledgement of complexity and all its layers in the context of the data necessary to its correct comprehension, and which was explicitly used in this paper in the 'Case Description' section in particular. To conclude on this matter, research needs to be relevant and reach its audience through selected communication about its contribution in the field in order to be considered valid. Choices in this matter are made by us researchers, and it is important to note that "aiming for practical change is no more subjective than research that aims to build theory" (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). We are investigating individual practices here, thus aiming to grasp and propose an insight into teaching experiences to potential outsiders.

By applying these criteria consistently throughout our research process, we create a frame for continuous evaluation of its reliability, with a focus on the overall structure. Similar criteria can be applied to the interviewer (Bryman, 2012, p. 211), or both interviewers in our case. The following aspects have been elaborated by Kvale (2007), to define the researcher as a "research instrument" herself to be accurate in her interventions and "able to assist the subjects in the unfolding of their narratives" (p. 147). For him, this is made possible by someone who is, as an interviewer, knowledgeable, structuring, clear, gentle, steering, sensitive, open, critical, remembering and interpreting (Kvale, 2007, p. 148-149). Drawing from this conceptualization, we apply this criteria along the interview process. To begin with, due to the intercultural and international context of the study, it is crucial to interact with all the participants in a "knowledgeable" and "sensitive" manner. Dividing our interviews into two different sections based on the participants' country of reference enabled us to have specific knowledge and extensive experience of the contexts in which each of them is evolving, and thus to have a greater accuracy in the questions and interrogations we transmitted to them. In addition, this specific knowledge gives a clear advantage in

comprehending the nuances of what is said, understanding the implicit and to "notice as well what is not said" (Kvale, 2007, p. 149) in a sensitive way. Such empathy and trust established with the interviewee, however, must stay in a structured frame, with clear boundaries to the interview. This was implemented here by a short presentation to start with the interview, later closed in a similar way by offering the participant a possibility to add any relevant information to the conversation. In the meantime, and coherently to the semi-structured nature of the interview, the researcher is responsible for letting the conversation flow naturally, while providing some guidance to explore the project's points of interest and steer it in the aimed direction, with clear instructions. As we will explore more in depth later, the writing of an interview protocol is an efficient way to tackle this aspect, but should stay relatively loose so that it does not limit the openness of our participants. During the course of these conversations, we specifically paid attention to tolerate every type of answer, pauses, and reassured the participants about the explorative and non-evaluating nature of this study (Bryman, 2012, p. 41). More specifically, this attentive listening was usually reflected in the use of the phrase "as you mentioned earlier", showing the participant our interest in and recollection of their answers. We chose to detach ourselves from the "critical" and "interpreting" qualifications mentioned by Kvale (2007, pp. 148-149), because of the aforementioned explorative aspect of the study. Indeed, the quality of this project does not reside in right answers but in how the participants describe their own practices. In this regard, we limited ourselves to bouncing back on their answers to obtain more details or be sure to understand, while being careful never to give intentions before they mentioned it themselves.

LANGUAGE QUESTION

A language is for its speakers "a symbol of their social identity" and of a specific "cultural reality" (Braçaj, 2014, p. 332). As such, it makes sense to interview people in their own languages, or the one they teach in. Language is indeed "culturally embedded" (House, 2018, pp. 20-21) and is thus the reflection of larger ideas. Expressing oneself in their own language offers a liberty and a nuance that might be limited in other instances. However, with this paper being written in English and for the sake of the research, this condition implies the necessity of a translation. The use of a third language (English), which differs from the two languages of the data set (French and German) allows us as researchers to stand on common ground in analyzing both cases. This combination of languages is also a way to create a bridge between cultures and a mutual and global understanding of the object of our research. This research taking place in an "international, intercultural, and inter-linguistic" setting (Richardson et al., 2017, p. 1) leads to specific considerations, as "translation is not a neutral technical process" and "responsible decisions" have to be made (Richardson et al., 2017, p. 2). The methodological choice made here is the one of an a priori translation. More specifically, the interviews will be realized in original languages, then transcribed and translated before being analyzed. This is possible due to the focus on content and themes emerging from the data set preferred to a semiotic approach, which would make necessary the focus on the specific words used by the interviewees. It is important to note that the translation process implies more than a transfer from one language to another. Translation can be seen as a conversion process (Braçaj, 2014, p. 334). There is a process of information substitution taking place. We refer here to the concept of cultural translation developed and characterized by Nida & Taber (2003). Translation goes beyond its linguistic aspect and embraces a cultural dimension. Following Nida's (1964) idea, the focus of the translation process is ensuring an accurate adaptation "first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style" (p. 14). The analysis and reading of the newly obtained text should be continuously in contact with its cultural aspects and dimension. To

ensure this, even though we decided for an a priori translation on which we are basing our analysis, we always took care to refer to the original interview transcripts in order to ensure that the meaning was not modified or misinterpreted (see Framework of Analysis). This exercise implies constant close consideration with both language versions, to expand the limits brought by translation in this research project "[...] so that the reader can experience the same feeling that the author of the original language tends to convey to the readers" (Braçaj, 2014, p. 335). Translation is "always enmeshed in a set of power relations" (Braçaj, 2014, p. 336) which make such precautions necessary.

Tying into our constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, we consider the use of language as a meaning-making process playing an "instrumental role in the way that we connect with the world" (Kim et al., 2022, p. 1). We embrace here Myhhailyuk & Ohlod's idea that "languages help us construct the incredibly complex knowledge systems we have" (2015, p. 37). One of the main specificities and challenges of both the French and the German languages, especially considering the gendered perspective of our research, is their "grammatical gender language" nature which leads to "most words used to refer to generic members of a role [being] in a grammatically masculine form" (Kim et al., 2022, p. 1-2). In this regard, translating our data set into gender-neutral English raises questions. This difference between languages invites to find a way to "compensate" during the translation process, with a risk of simplifying or distorting the original text's meaning (Robert-Foley, 2024, p. 161). However, the use of English as the global lingua franca enables us to arrive at a broader reach and more intercultural analysis.

DATA ACQUISITION

In this section, we lay out the process of collecting the data for our research and highlight our contemplations on using purposive sampling to conduct qualitative interviews which were later transcribed and translated. The translated interview transcripts opened an opportunity for us to take a look into the self-understanding of the teachers while offering a common ground to put them into perspective with each other when discussing the matter of gender in the classroom.

Purposive Sampling

Conducting research on teachers started off with the challenge of accessibility which sparked considerations regarding our point of departure (Bryman, 2012, p. 201). Since our research topic has the tendency of being polarizing and sensitive in the public eye, we anticipated having the deepest, most intimate and valuable insights from teachers whom we shared a level of trust with (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653). Not wanting to run into the risk of impersonal, surface level data lead us to screen our personal surroundings in search of suitable candidates. This decision in our participant selection aligns with the principles of snowball sampling, an approach to goal-oriented non-probability and purposive sampling, where researchers "make[] initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then use[] these to establish contact with others" (Bryman, 2012, pp. 201-203, 418, 424). We subscribe to the idea that this less randomized choice of research participants increases the likelihood for our interviewees to share relevant information about our topic of interest (Bryman, 2012, p. 202; Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 653-654). We came to the realization that both of us researchers were familiar with a pool of individuals who could be identified as secondary school teachers through our own education history and other relevant social relations. This collateral configuration of participants (see Table 1) also coincides with a specific young audience of teenagers (see Appendix 2), who are very influenceable adults-to-be and still in the process of shaping their identities (Harter, 2015, p. 322). From there, we narrowed this group down to a

collection of eligible study participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). This assessment yielded two very similar sets of potential interviewees and supported our interest in case study research (Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 212). The prospective participants offered a geographical frame in which to situate our comparative case study. Because of the level of scrutiny teachers undergo on a daily basis, they mostly keep their public contact data to a minimum which is why snowball sampling also allowed us to overcome the hurdle of access through personal connection (Bryman, 2012, pp. 203, 424).

From there, we fine-tuned our criteria for participant selection and tailored it towards our problem area by identifying touchpoints the pedagogues might have with gender in the classroom depending on the subject they are teaching (Porta & Keating, 2008, pp. 212-213). While we were focused in terms of locality, we have chosen to stay broad with regards to the age range and thus, work experience of our interviewees, in case a generation effect (Gutierrez-Muñoz & Brannen, 2021) sets in when interacting with the topic of gender offering variety in the interviewees answers. We proceeded to mimic the respective national gender ratio of teachers at secondary schools by borrowing from the quota sampling method (Bryman, 2012, p. 203; Campbell et al., 2020, p. 654). According to the data provided by *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators* (2021), the distribution of female teachers in lower secondary lies at 60% in France and 66% in Germany and in upper secondary at 60% in France and 56% in Germany with 2019 as the year of reference (p. 404). The combination of the conditions of locality, subject, age and gender covered a lot of ground regarding prerequisites the participants must have and acted as guidelines to our exploratory research. Our goal was to elicit diversity in the answers within the narrow scope provided by our criteria of locality (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). This, however, does not mean that we seek to generalize beyond our participant group without further contextualization, but that we are interested in individual experiences developed by personal trajectories in the two specific regions. We embrace the individuality and richness of data, much along the lines of our constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and research design. Our sampling procedure resulted in us having to consider a

certain breadth when determining the number and duration of the interviews (Bryman, 2012, p. 425; Campbell et al., 2020, p. 654). To ensure all of the mentioned criteria appear in our two cases and for the sake of comparability, we opted to conduct a total of twelve interviews with the following segmentation (Bryman, 2012, p. 426):

Criteria	France	Germany
Subject: biology	Hortense	Axel
Subject: language	Fabienne (French)	Charlotte (French, German) Hannah (German) Marie (German, English) Sabine (English) Simon (English)
Subject: PE	Nathalie	Sabine
Subject: History/Social Sciences	Fred (History/ Geography) Mathilde (Social Sciences) Raphael (History/ Geography)	Hannah Simon
Experienced teachers	Fabienne Fred Hortense Nathalie	Axel Charlotte Hannah Marie Sabine
Young/new teachers	Mathilde Raphael	Simon
Men	Fred Raphael	Axel Simon
Women	Fabienne Hortense Mathilde Nathalie	Charlotte Hannah Marie Sabine

Table 1. Overview of participants by subject, experience and gender

At the outset of our research journey, we had to find a way of striking a balance between the amount of interviews necessary to achieve sufficient saturation and the time and page limitations given to us by the CCG program guidelines for thesis

writing (Bryman, 2012, p. 425). This structure was indeed later confirmed by data saturation as we were able to reach "convincing conclusions" (Bryman, 2012, p. 425) due to the aforementioned homogeneity in our participants' local surroundings and key characteristics (p. 426). Emerging from these alternating steps of reviewing the purpose of our research and practical circumstances, and building on the snowball method of sampling, we gathered our panel of interviewees (Bryman, 2012, p. 418).

We started reaching out to our interviewees through various forms of media depending on pre-existing possibilities for contact. Because of their professional nature and their ability to hold longer texts, we chose emails to be our primary channel of communication. To start off the data acquisition process, we developed a sample email in English in order to be in alignment with each other about its contents. Thereafter, we translated the initial text to German and French to correspond with our choice to capture the teachers in their respective native languages. Our final email templates contained a message introducing ourselves and our study, stating the purpose of our research and closing with a request for an interview (see Figure 1). Differing from candidate to candidate, we added a personal message in the beginning which helped us create a common ground of understanding. In order not to breach any consent guidelines about personal data, we reminded the teachers of our personal relation to them and addressed how we had obtained their personal contact information. Throughout this entire process, we kept in mind that we were looking for spontaneous answers during the interviews which is why we were careful not to reveal too much information about our research framework and our interview questions in advance.

With some participants, however, we had to be flexible and approach them through the messaging apps WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger which are not designed for extensive texts and therefore needed to contact them through the use of shortened versions of the sample email. Here our focus was to raise interest for our study by explaining the research goal, offering them to become a part of it as an interviewee and to acquire access to their email addresses for further communication. Once the candidates agreed to be contacted via email, we sent

them a personalized email including all of the information from the sample mail for the sake of completion and a homogenous communication process from that point forward. To ensure every teacher had received the same information and that our research validity was intact, we determined that all further communication would run through emails. After having received every teacher's agreement to participate in our study, further correspondence included the distribution of consent forms and the setup of Microsoft Teams meetings in preparation of the actual interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Concept

Interviews are common occurrences in daily life (Bryman, 2012, p. 209), with the research interview being specifically a "prominent data-collection strategy" (Bryman, 2012, p. 209). Following Bryman's classification, and the qualitative approach of this research, qualitative interviews are implemented for this project. Interviews are "probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research" (Bryman, 2012, p. 469), and semi-structured interviews are specifically offering "remarkable potential [...] to address specific dimensions of your research question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study" (Galletta, 2013, p. 1-2). This hybrid method indeed offers the possibility to dive into the interviewee's own perspectives and ideas and to explore the "lived experiences" of participants (Galletta, 2013, p. 9) as opposed to structured interviews used in quantitative research which lead to standardized data (Bryman, 2012, p. 470). The use of this methodology thus becomes relevant here as we interrogate the teacher's practices in the classroom with an important focus on their self-perception. The semi-structured characteristics of our interviews allow this freedom in their expression and while letting the participants prioritize what is and/or feels important to them. Combining these potential new inputs with pre-determined questions guarantee a common ground to base the analysis on, while not limiting it to what we are expecting a priori due to this method's "repertoire of possibilities" and "versatility" (Galletta, 2013, p. 24).

The episodic dimension of the practices we aim to investigate also make the choice of interviews rather than observations relevant, with the possibility to "reconstruct" these events during the created conversations (Bryman, 2012, p. 494). More concretely, semi-structured interviews are building up a space to talk about personal and lived experiences while addressing at the same time "theoretically driven variables of interest" (Galletta, 2013, p. 24; Bryman, 2012, p. 495). In our research project, this is reflected in the choices of the questions constituting the interview guide (see Appendix 1), which we will elaborate on in the next section.

Using this method of semi-structured interviews also gives flexibility to both participants and researchers, and offers a great solution to all the practical concerns that can emerge (Galletta, 2013, p. 22). Our interviews have been conducted online, over the span of three weeks in March and April 2024, at a time which best suited the participants.

Using semi-structured interviews allows us to explore individual lives and practices of the participants, which constitute a necessary material to analyze to fully understand a social institution (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918/1927, cited in Chase, 2007, p. 60).

Design of the Interview Protocol

It is important to note that a "research question and interview question are not the same thing" (Arsel, 2017, p. 943). Semi-structured interviews are a combination of open-ended and theoretically driven questions (Galletta, 2013, p. 45). The formulation of these questions is the result of a long process of reflection to create in the interview protocol a "deliberate progression toward a fully in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study" (Galletta, 2013, p. 45). There is a deliberate focus of the questions on the research object, to ensure a collection of relevant data for the study, as well as an open segment for new perspectives to emerge freely. Semi-structured interview guides can vary from a list of topics to address to a more detailed set of questions, always giving the possibility to the researcher to improvise freely around it to get a flowing interaction (Bryman,

2012, p. 473). Arsel (2017) describes the interview protocol as an "outline [...] listing key points of exploration, provisional questions, and planned probes and transitions" (p. 941). He insists on the idea that not preparing such a guide is risky as it does not give any guarantee about the outcome of the conversation and gives too much space to uncertainty. The transition "from emic to etic" (Arsel, 2017, p. 942) is the central focus of this part of the research process. It involves reflecting on the language to use to fit the participants, the timeframe of the questions and their sequencing to get a logical approach, as well as the themes to be evoked. However, the main concepts of the research do not need to be necessarily given priority by the questions, as it might be more interesting to let them emerge, as a way to understand what place it takes in the participants' lives and experiences. In our project, the focus is put on gender and individual experiences. We decided to ask directly about these concepts, however leaving the possibility to our participants to interpret them in their own understanding.

More specifically, the interview protocol designed for this research project is composed of 14 questions, with opportunities to follow-up according to some possible answers anticipated during the writing process and the answers collected during the first interviews (in the case of the later ones). This protocol was organized around three main ideas, introduced by a short presentation moment. First, our points of interest reside in the classroom and the events taking place in this specific situation; then, we chose to talk about practices more generally, in order to conclude with broader reflections about teaching and 'being a teacher'. The interview guide (see Appendix 1) is a combination of detail-oriented questions, with the formulation "can you recall such an event?" and more generic ones, inviting a certain reflexivity with for example "what do you consider your goal as a teacher?". If it is crucial for the effective realization of the interviews, this protocol is a tool which inserts itself in a larger set of events and practices.

Due to the specificity of our research, namely the multiple languages used to gather and create the data, we required "individual protocols for [the two] specific subgroups" (Alser, 2017, p. 944) in French and German. This translation

work was done with consideration for their cultural embedment, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Interview Process

The interviews were conducted online, using Microsoft Teams software, due to the geographical remoteness of the participants. If this can be seen as a limit to some extent, it also offers distinct advantages, including flexibility, comfort and recording possibilities. It is commonly mentioned that in-person meetings foster a higher level of trust between the participants and the researcher. However, this allows us to record the interview in a less noticeable way for the interviewees after ensuring their consent, thus creating less discomfort due to this.

Qualitative interviews can have a lot of advantages in collecting data for interpretative research, but this implies that they are done properly. In fact, several precautions have to be taken in the research involving interviewing participants. Field practices, despite the loose aspect of the interviews we aim for here (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14), are very clearly defined and need to follow a set of principles, with the researcher becoming an instrument here (Galletta, 2013, p. 75).

To begin with, a pilot interview is an efficient means to test all the variables of the future interviews with the participants as well as to gain some experience (Bryman, 2012, p. 474). In this study, the pilot interview was carried out on a French teacher, but in English. This allowed us to both assist in the interview and create in this moment a common basis and understanding on how the future interviews could be conducted. The participant was chosen on this criteria, as well as a pre-existing relationship with him, allowing flexibility and trust both ways. In this project, it confirmed the accuracy of the questions and the time scheduled for it. Also, it is of interest to note that the participant selected for the pilot could not have been a member of our main sample, since he did not fit the conditions for this and the quotas (Bryman, 2012, p. 264). The following interviews were carried out with a one-to-one setting, and spread over the span of three weeks due to the availability of our interviewees and some impromptu changes. During this process,

the researcher plays an important role, especially in a semi-structured interview. With the support of a priori written questions in the interview guide, an interview is the moment to gather data and during which one has, as a researcher, to find a balance between following the flow of the conversation and orienting it towards the topic of interest (Galletta, 2013, p. 76), without stopping the participants in their opinions and ideas. A reciprocity is created as both participants of the conversation are equally engaged in it, despite a possible imbalance in the timing of their interventions. As Galletta (2013) specifies it, this reciprocity can take three different forms, usually combined in the course of an interview: clarification, meaning generation, and critical reflection (p. 78). Interviewing also leads to reflexivity, to question whether or not the prompts given have led to answers relevant to the topic studied. In this project, the specificity of having two different interviewers for both parts of the sample led to a need for both an individual and a shared reflexivity, after each interview, to facilitate the process and ensure a coherence in the gathering of the data. This methodological strategy also confirmed the saturation observed after the number of interviews, and so its relevance.

Transcription and Translation

Due to the interpretative and comparative nature of the research here, it was necessary for us to gather material and data in a parallel form. We then decided to transcribe the interviews fully, to create a written set of data, more relevant in the context of content and thematic analysis. Also, transcribing allows a more in depth analysis, since it does not rely solely on the researcher's memory (Bryman, 2012, p. 483). Indeed, the researcher has to be "highly alert" on the conversation flow (Bryman, 2012, p. 482), and the notes taken might be limited. On the practical side, these transcripts were first written automatically with the Microsoft Teams Tool, which was made possible due to the online aspect of all our interviews. Secondly, all transcripts were read, corrected and completed accordingly with the recordings of each interview. This step of the process also allows us to get a primary reflection on the data, lead a first very broad analysis while also enriching

the content of the future interviews. This transcription process can be designed as the first step in order to reach the final form of the data, but needs to be followed by a translation into English. To fulfill the confidentiality conditions and requirements of a research involving external participants, we decided to personally work on the translation to ensure that no data would be shared with a third party without the consent of our interviewees. This concern for privacy, and to ensure a comprehensive translation of our transcripts guaranteeing the equivalence in meanings and ideas led us to both use a software (DeepL) for the first draft, and look specifically into each of them to make sure these transcripts stay faithful to the originals.

In conclusion, the data we will be analyzing in this research paper consists of twelve translated transcriptions, corresponding to 220 pages, which we arrived at by conducting a set of semi-structured, qualitative interviews.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Throughout the entire process of inspecting a snippet of the social world by way of conducting interviews with teachers and assessing the transcripts, we were led by our guiding principle of anticipating ethically important moments (Bryman, 2012, p. 130; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, pp. 261-262; Wiles, 2012, pp. 1-2). Making moral judgements and acknowledging these moments helped us sustain the integrity of our project by protecting our research participants and by being aware of what influences and implications our role as researchers might entail (Bryman, 2012, p. 130; Wiles, 2012, p. 4). We concede that investigating our two home countries and having used the method of purposive sampling produced only a limited pool of potential participants. However, we see this form of conscious partiality as an asset that helped us explore our research topic on an even deeper, culturally cognizant level (Bryman, 2012, pp. 40, 146). To us, it was not enough to simply figure out potential ethical issues before starting our research but we consider ethical awareness and reflexivity more of a constant process which helped us brace ourselves for any spontaneous occurrences or ethical challenges along the way (Galletta, 2013, p. 104; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, pp. 262-263; Wiles, 2012, p. 2). Throughout our research, we identified the following ethically important moments:

Approaching Teachers on the Basis of Informed Consent

Even before first getting in touch with our panel of interviewees we had to contemplate what kind and how much information to disclose to the teachers in order to receive their informed consent about their participation (Bryman, 2012, p. 138; Wiles, 2012, pp. 25, 27). Here, we had to navigate the ethical dilemma of how to ensure that the teachers knew enough about our research to make a decision about their participation without running into any issues of "contaminating people's answers to questions" (Bryman, 2012, pp. 138-139, 143) by priming them too much or any form of deception later on in the research (Bryman, 2012, p. 143; Wiles, 2012, p. 6). For this reason we created the

aforementioned sample email which clearly stated who we are, why we are conducting this research, the purpose of it and their potential role in it (Bryman, 2012, p. 139; Wiles, 2012, p. 25):

Hello XX,

(personalized introduction)

I am writing to you regarding my master thesis I am currently writing with XX (in copy) which will conclude our Master's degree in the Culture Communication and Globalization program at Aalborg University (Denmark). This program is focused on interculturality, and we specialized in gender studies, which is why we are now investigating this topic.
Our goal for the thesis project is to understand how teachers approach topics of gender and identity in the classroom, and how they express and perform their own identities simultaneously with their teacher role.
In this context, we would really like to meet you (online) for an interview which would take around one hour, during the spring (March or April) to talk about these topics. This interview would take place in French/German. The interviews will be conducted anonymously and you will appear under an alias in the final paper.

We are available for any questions you may have and are looking forward to hear from you soon.
Best regards,

XX

Figure 1. Sample email for the research participants

As the sample email further reveals, we also reflected upon the matter of confidentiality of our interviewees before contacting them. Although all of them work in democratic countries and most likely would not have to face the risk of

social or legal repercussions for taking part in our research (Cassar et al., 2023, p. 241; Wiles, 2012, pp. 7, 66), we thought it would be beneficial to involve the use of aliases in our interview transcripts to ensure their anonymity. This way the pseudonyms would still prevent any external harm to the participants that we might have not been able to foresee (Bryman, 2012, p. 135; Wiles, 2012, p. 7). In this course, we were also aware that the teachers we had contacted might be more prone to disclosing sensitive or private information about themselves and their political beliefs if their statements were not recognizable to other readers or even other participants in the study (Bryman, 2012, p. 142; Cassar et al., 2023, p. 241). Anonymity was especially important in light of our interview panel working in the same regions or even at the same schools. This is why we additionally decided to remove any names of acquaintances, schools or smaller cities in our transcripts that might give away the teachers' identities as well (Bryman, 2012, p. 142). After taking all of these initial considerations into account, we disseminated personalized versions of our sample email to our selection of potential interviewees (Wiles, 2012, p. 27). This was done only once in order not to not overload them and ensure their voluntary participation (Bryman, 2012, p. 138). Although we were open to our request possibly being declined, going so far as to planning who to contact further, we waited until we had the acceptance of everyone in order to avoid deception within our research yet again (Bryman, 2012, p. 143).

Upon obtaining informed consent through email answers from all of our participants and receiving the confirmation to meet for a video-call interview, we negotiated an appropriate time for our meeting, but also provided our interviewees with a consent form that they needed to sign (Bryman, 2012, p. 138; Cassar et al., 2023, p. 240). We decided to stagger the distribution of these documents and to send them with one of the follow-up emails in order to lower the threshold for willingness to participate (Wiles, 2012, p. 27). These consent forms were on the one hand, designed to inform participants of their prevailing right to withdraw their participation and to explain how their data was going to be processed (Wiles, 2012, p. 25). On the other hand, they were important to us as researchers in order to have “a signed record of consent” that we can fully assure ourselves with

(Bryman, 2012, p. 140). Accordingly, an integral part of our interview guide was the addition of a couple of introductory guidelines for our informants (see Appendix 1). Here, we once again noted to remind them of their rights, to check in with them about their voluntary participation and to outline the topic and duration of the interview to come. Before starting, it was important for us to inform them at which point they were being recorded and to let them know the recording had ended as soon as we had stopped it in order to avoid ethical misconduct by using what the teachers thought were "off-the-record" remarks in our analysis (Bryman, 2012, pp. 475, 487).

The Ambiguous Power Relations in the Interview Scenario

As we approached the stage of conducting the interviews, we were met with another ethically important moment regarding the shared history we had with some of our research participants. In a regular interview scenario, there would be a hierarchical power structure between the interviewer and their informant where the former would, inherent to their role, execute power through questions and subject the informant to them in order to extract answers from them (Bryman, 2012, pp. 491-492; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013, p. 494). With our study, however, we had come to realize that these power relations between us as the researchers and some of the interviewees who used to be our teachers were not only being challenged, but sometimes even inverted. This new, more reciprocal dynamic (Galletta, 2013, p. 75) resulted firstly, in a surplus of information from the interviewee that an interviewer, if they had been a stranger, would not have had access to and secondly, in a row of personal references or questions. Anticipating that this might be an ethical issue also due to our semi-structured interview design, we made sure to detach our private educational background during the interview to the best of our knowledge by not engaging in conversations that might have alluded to it or by asking them to apply it to a broader context or to clarify (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013, p. 494). This was ultimately done to not exclude the reader, to generate answers which would be more complementary to those of other panel members and therefore, to add more value later in our

cumulative process of analysis (Galletta, 2013, p. 72). Generally however, instead of being alarmed about this circumstance, we interpreted the breaking down of hierarchies as an opportunity for the teachers "to become *participants* [...] rather than *subjects*" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 271), that would grant us even deeper insights into the teachers' opinions and identities (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013, pp. 495-496).

We recognized going into, but especially during the interviews, that tensions of power also played out in the nature of the teaching profession of our participants (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013, p. 494). Considering that all of them come from an academic background, we were aware that our interviewees were no novices in the matter of qualitative research and a lot of them had already encountered or even worked with theories about gender during their own studies or later on in life. These preconditions most likely had an impact not only on the content of their answers, but also on their behavior since they were already familiar with interview procedures.

Researcher Bias in Study Design and Handling of Data

When discussing ethically important moments from the side of our research participants we also have to turn our attention to ourselves and our role as researchers. In conformity with our reflexive approach to our study, we take into account that our personal beliefs and values have had an influence on the making of this study and can be traced throughout the paper in our line of argumentation (Bryman, 2012, p. 39; Galletta, 2013, pp. 11-12). This is particularly evident regarding biases in the development of our interview guide, the transcription and translation of the interviews, and the analysis of our acquired data (Bryman, 2012, pp. 475, 482). To be more transparent to the reader about our research and about the angle we have taken on with it (Bryman, 2012, pp. 39-40), the two of us situate ourselves as young, white and female academic scholars with previous knowledge in the fields of gender, culture, communication and globalization and consider ourselves to be feminists. Our understanding of the research topic and of the social world lead us to take on a critical stance towards the institutionalized privilege or

disadvantage of certain social groups and shaped our considerations during the research process (Bryman, 2012, pp. 40, 491-493). We recognize that all of these personal factors inform our decisions privately and also throughout our approach to research, but we believe that "while life experiences and familiarity with the research context may bias the research, they will also offer important insights" (Galletta, 2013, p. 12). Even though objectivity and entirely unbiased research from our social constructionist and interpretivist perspective cannot truly be achieved (Bryman, 2012, pp. 39-40), we have undertaken efforts to minimize partiality.

For instance, by carefully formulating and following an interview guide, we were able to somewhat eradicate an evaluating tone which would frame the question in a certain way, and derive follow up questions with a clearer view (Bryman, 2012, pp. 471-472). Because we wanted to verify whether our attempts at a value free set of questions were successful, we decided to conduct the aforementioned pilot interview with an additional informant who had similar qualities to the ones we chose as our interviewee criteria, prior to the main interviews (Bryman, 2012, p. 474; Chenail, 2011, p. 257). We found that this test run also gave us the opportunity to get a feel for time management, to gain an overview of the scope and subject matters our questions evoked and to polish up the interview guide based on our experiences during the interview, on the reactions of our pilot interviewee and on his conclusive feedback (Bryman, 2012, pp. 473-475; Chenail, 2011, pp. 257-258). In pursuit of reflexive research, we maintained this feedback loop in all subsequent interviews by asking the teachers how they felt in order to check on their emotional wellbeing (Wiles, 2012, pp. 7, 64-65), whether the questions were comprehensible, and if they had any suggestions for improvement which we were open to discuss among ourselves as researchers and implement as necessary (Bryman, 2012, pp. 474-475; Galletta, 2013, p. 12).

When it comes to the processing of the interviews through transcription, translation and analysis, we had some concerns about the preservation of the original wording of our data and its meaning (Bryman, 2012, pp. 484-485). For the

most part, we stuck to the original recording as best we could, in certain instances, however, we took the liberty to change certain formulations which we interpreted according to our understanding of the context they appeared in. We did this out of necessity for the legibility and accuracy of the meaning of the texts and is considered to be regular practice among qualitative researchers (Bryman, 2012, p. 485). Our goal with translating all twelve of our transcripts and to attach them to our paper in the appendix (see Appendices 3-14) was not just to aid our own analysis which had to be conducted in English due to our personal language skills, but also to lay them open to the reader in case of any doubts about the influence of researcher bias on the text (Bryman, 2012, p. 482). This way of disclosure "opens up the data to public scrutiny by other researchers" (Bryman, 2012, p. 482) in the upcoming analysis as well, in which we concede that we cannot ascribe intentions to the statements of our participants while we are interpreting them from our own standpoint (Bryman, 2012, p. 615).

LIMITATIONS

Despite the rigor of this study, it remains crucial to mention and address its potential limitations and constraints we had to face during its creation.

When questioning the school environment, it is essential to consider all the actors taking part in it. This project focuses on teachers and teaching practices which are occurring in contrast and response to pupils' behaviors, or at least being considerate of those. Students are the biggest school group in numbers, however, hence the importance of considering their perspective. Such a study could have taken place in an ethnographic setting, with participant observation. Ethnography is a method which enables the researcher to examine in detail "time, place, and context" (Powell, 2022, p. 20) along with the investigation topic due to the immersion within the research context (Bryman, 2012, p. 432). However, this methodology didn't qualify for this research as it didn't converge with the practical conditions of our research (time-frame, field accessibility and geographical situation) and was limited by conceptual obstacles such as school bureaucracy (Díaz de Rada, 2007, p. 206; Wiles, 2012, p. 6). The chosen interview methodology is also an effective way to dive deeper into the self-understanding of the participants and their vision of both their practices and environment, giving us an original lens which would stay unreachable from an outsider perspective. This approach could have been extended to students and completed our analysis of the intended practices with their perception and reception in an attempt to get a fuller picture of the interactions taking place in educational institutions. Considering our focus on secondary education, this would imply interviewing children from age 10 to 18, which brings both legal and ethical concerns. Indeed, if young people are just as much "competent social actors" as adults, children's participation in academic research needs to be handled very carefully (Bodén, 2021, p. 2), especially in regards to power relations and the effect they can have on answers given by the interviewees.

Regarding our data collection process, we decided to conduct the interviews in the native languages of our participants, i.e. French and German, primarily to

put our participants at ease and facilitate the interaction. The downside of this choice is that each half of the interviews required a different interviewer to make this possible. This decision was the result of an extensive reflection process, to balance the cultural relevance and interest of using native languages with the challenges this would bring later on in the analysis. As mentioned earlier, this also played a part in our resolution to opt for qualitative analysis, enabling a culturally and interpretative approach which always remains sensitive to the context of production of our data.

This research is based on data consisting of the translated transcripts of the interviews of twelve teachers. A few limitations can be noticed here: the number and length of the interviews (and transcripts), the number of participants, and the lack of ethnic diversity in the pool of participants. To begin with, the number and duration of our interactions with the participants were initially chosen due to external consideration. This was later confirmed as a relevant quantity of data for our study, according to the saturation principle. Also, having a set timing of one hour for our interviews seemed to be in our favor. It was both a way for us to control the amount of data we could retrieve for each interview, and to lead the conversation in such a way that we get relevant and sufficient information while not overloading the participants with questions and information (Bryman, 2012, p. 484). On the researcher's side, guaranteeing a fixed-time interview duration was more convenient for our participants to include in their schedules, since we had to schedule the interviews up to a month in advance to ensure their availability. On this matter, the number of participants can seem limited, and does not allow us to immediately generalize this study to a global level. However, we are interested here in individual practices and had to adapt to the external constraints of a university project involving a wide range of actors. Finally, it is crucial to address the lack of diversity which could be pointed out. Indeed, we acknowledge that all our participants are white, which keeps us away from a form of racial diversity and prevents us from tackling potential 'intersectional' considerations (Crenshaw, 1991) regarding their own experiences. This results from the fact that we, researchers, gathered this pool of participants following a

'purposive sampling' methodology based on our own social circles, and trying to reflect the experiences we had observed previously in educational institutions of the two studied regions, in which a significant majority of the teachers belong to this specific ethnic group. If we reached a representative sample in terms of gender, age, and subjects taught, this dimension could not be ensured regarding the political opinions, as stated earlier. Similarly, we are limited here to a binary approach to gender, by the profile of the participants and the practicability, but we acknowledge the importance of going beyond this limitation in the global understanding of gender as a concept. Approaching the participants with an explicit definition of our topic led us to interact with people ready to openly talk about gender, which might of course create biases but can also be interpreted as guaranteeing an open conversation. This sample is situated in a specific timeframe, framing our research in a cross-sectional design (Bryman, 2012, p. 59). Alternatively, a longitudinal approach (Bryman, 2012, p. 63) could have been used as part of a longer-term research project, since studying the same cohort over an extended period of time enables researchers to "examine changes within individuals and groups in the target population" (Zimmer & Knodel, 2021, p. 1252). Indeed, the time-situated analysis produced in this study does not allow us to reach any conclusions of causality (Zimmer & Knodel, 2021, p. 1253), but is a time- and resource-efficient manner of exploring the topic, coherent with the choices made regarding the cross-national comparison as well as the "patterns of association" (Bryman, 2012, p. 59) we identify in our data set following the content and thematic analysis methods.

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

In order to extract findings about our area of interest from the data set we collected, we embraced a combination of qualitative content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis as our data analysis methods. Here, we were informed by our interpretivist understanding of the social world and followed a hermeneutical approach to our data analysis. While hermeneutics emphasize the understanding of text based on the standpoint of the author, we therefore decided to approach the interview transcripts we collected from the dialogues with our panel of teachers with contextual sensitivity (Bryman, 2012, pp. 560-561; Kutsyuruba & McWatters 2023, pp. 217-218, 221). We start this chapter off by explaining how qualitative content analysis helped us develop a "strategy of searching for themes" (Bryman, 2012, p. 559) through purposeful and context-minded data segmentation in categories and provided us with a solid foundation on which to build our further interpretations by way of engaging in reflexive thematic analysis (Mayring, 2000). We decided to prioritize a systemized approach to our data in order to stay true to our comparative research design and create congruency in handling our data set.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Content analysis centers on "all sort[s] of recorded communication" (Mayring, 2000), such as textual documents in the form of interview transcripts, as objects of analysis and allows us as researchers to make inferences about this data based on a set of systematic, reductive and flexible procedures (Schreier, 2012), leading to overarching concepts (Bryman, 2012, pp. 557, 576-577; Roller, 2019; Tunison, 2023, pp. 85-86). Although this qualitative method has its roots in quantitative research, we see its detachment from rigid quantification as an advantage to our research objective of understanding teaching individuals and their pedagogical practices against the background of socio-political circumstances in the way it simultaneously embraces nuance and organization (Bryman, 2012, p. 578; Mayring, 2000, Roller, 2019). Looking back at the language question in this research paper, we found that, due to the cultural differences in wording within

our data, a quantified, computerized approach would produce a strong bias towards certain word formulations and create divergence or even confusion despite the similarities in meaning (Bryman, 2012, p. 578). This is why we opted for qualitative content analysis which still ensures a form of methodological triangulation through its quantitative origins and "develop[s] them into qualitative-interpretative steps of analysis" by taking relationality and context into account (Mayring, 2000).

In order to arrive at findings about our data, we followed the implications of our inductive research design which lets the data primarily speak for itself through the act of interpreting it and the process meaning construction (Schreier, 2012) and took on an inductive perspective to the organization of our interpretations as proposed by Mayring (2000). First off, we constructed significant categories for our texts by "formulat[ing] a criterion of definition, derived from theoretical background and research question, which determines the aspects of the textual material taken into account" (Kvale, 2007; Mayring, 2000; Tunison, 2023, p. 86). What this means for our concrete data set is that we looked at the comparability between our interview questions and the teachers answers in terms of subject matter and then determined tentative categories which helped us gain an overview of our large data set, offered room for more comparison and prepared it for further interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1285; Kvale, 2007). Secondly, we followed this category formation by identifying gradually emerging categories through interpreting context-dependent themes or patterns throughout the interview timeline and by modifying the initial ones accordingly (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1285; Mayring, 2000; Morse, 2008, pp. 727-728). We consider this stage of analysis a phase of rigorous revision through the implementation of a "feedback loop" (Mayring, 2000), ensuring that we adapt the categories to the overall context and "latent content" that slowly rises to the surface of the overarching categories as the "primary content" (Mayring, 2000; Roller, 2019; Schreier, 2012). Here, we developed our strategy for categorization, also referred to as coding, by systematically and manually labeling analytical units comprised of linguistic structures called codes such as words, sentences and

paragraphs which we then grouped into pattern-based categories (Bryman, 2012, p. 577; Mayring, 2000; Tunison, 2023, pp. 86-88). What also comes to play at this stage is the research validity issue of reliability which we decided to approach by way of coding each other's interview transcripts to compare results with the coder who has already deeply examined the text through transcription and translation and to receive relevant feedback in case of a need for alteration (Kvale, 2007; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). In a third step, we took a look at the categories we had accumulated and subsumed them by commonality to a collection of condensed main categories, checked them for overall inter-coder reliability yet again and ultimately came to the "interpretation of results" (Bryman, 2012, p. 577; Kvale, 2007; Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012; Tunison, 2023, p. 88). This concluding interpretation of data juxtaposes the principle of reduction and creates a level of abstraction in line with the subject matter (Kvale, 2007).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

We utilize thematic analysis as a complementary extension to the content analysis method, for the greater flexibility and reflexivity it adds to our research (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Similarly to content analysis, this strategy consists of "identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data sets" (Forbes, 2022, p. 132). The main advantage of this method is that it differs from a methodology, in that it is not tied or constrained to a specific framework or bound to theoretical commitments (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). As a consequence, there is a large diversity in thematic analysis procedures and practices (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1). In this project, we oriented ourselves towards reflexive thematic analysis, which is defined by Braun and Clarke as part of the "big Q qualitative", meaning that we as researchers embrace and acknowledge biases, recognizing the "inherently interpretive" approach of our methods (2023, p. 2). This method does not accept the positivist perspective according to which interpretations are fixed and could be considered 'right' in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1) but accept divergences and acknowledge potential for inductive and deductive orientations to coding, semantic and latent interpretations - i.e. looking for the explicit as well as

the implicit - and an overall flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 39). These characteristics enable us to comprehend perspectives from different participants and generate new and unexpected insights (p. 257). The reflexive approach we specifically use in our design accepts the researcher's subjectivity and insists on the constant and continuous reflection on a priori assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 39). We subscribe to the idea that thematic analysis in itself is a method in its own right (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2), embracing its freedom to combine it with content analysis through a thoughtful "iterative and reflective" framework of analysis (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4).

Framework of Analysis and Data Presentation

Merging research methods raises the question of how we structured the practicalities of analyzing our data in order to arrive at valuable observations with regards to the teachers' discourse about their teaching practices. Our framework of analysis follows the principles of qualitative content analysis by defining main concepts which was expanded with reflexive thematic analysis by interpreting these based on the knowledge of our research topic and our familiarity with the data (Kvale, 2007; Mayring, 2000; Tunison, 2023, p. 86). This initial establishment of larger scale categories as a form of preliminary analysis was facilitated by the deeply engaging processes of transcription and translation which we carried out in advance of the analysis and which gave us extensive awareness of the content of the interviews (Bryman, 2012, p. 482). At this step of the data analysis, we started with "candidate themes" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297) which needed to be modified during the coding process to be better adapted to the data set. Translating this knowledge of the data into codes marks the transition from the first stage of analysis to the second, according to the '6-steps framework' developed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thereafter, we started with the second step by producing codes and recurring coding rules emerging from the raw data, including both "primary" (Mayring, 2000) or "semantic" and "latent" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18) features. This strategy is systematically applied to the entire data set and with specific attention to code each extract into as many different 'categories' as it is relevant, in order not to ignore the non-dominant narratives. In phase three, we grouped these categories to elevate the analysis to a broader scope with the identification of "overarching themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). For the sake of comprehensiveness and visualization, we chose to anlayze the data with the help of a table (see Figure 2, Mayring, 2000; Tunison, 2023, p. 86) collecting the coded extracts, the codes and the first "candidate themes" established during this first interpretative process.

Concept A			
Category 1	Category 2	…	Category N
coding rules			
"content" … from interviewee 1			
…			
"content" … from interviewee 12			

Table 2. Exemplary table in use for the coding process

The fourth step in this framework consists of the review of these predefined categories, at two different levels. First, we checked that the data collected in a category could be integrated in a pattern which makes sense on the 'individual-category' level. For those for which the results were conclusive, it is then, secondly, crucial to check their belonging in an overall story coherent with the general structure and narrative of the data set. Hereafter, the fifth step required us to "define and refine" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22) the core categories of the data set, identifying how and why they are valuable in the analysis. For the sixth and last step, we detailed an analytic narrative in the writing of the report, building arguments within and across the categories to provide an interesting interpretation of the story the data offers. In our case, we chose to analyze both cases in a unified manner, to display the similarities between the participants from the two countries.

As an example and to explain our process, we detail here the coding of an excerpt from the pilot interview. This also serves as an example of the data presentation which will be used throughout the analysis, indicating with each quote the profile of the interviewee [name, subject - country (page number)]:

"All right yes, I don't use it daily. From time to time, I will pop in and in some stuff I will (not understandable) inclusive language. I do not get requests from students to use it either. They don't use it much, but [...] as in English and Foreign Language I do reflect on the use of pronouns, and I tell students that there is that freedom, too. Though I have not adopted myself on an everyday basis the practice of that, but I do, yes."

Mathieu, English - France (pilot interview)

When looking at this answer, centered on the concept of gender inclusive language, we can note several teaching practices coming up. More specifically, this answer can be characterized as matching the following codes:

- using inclusive language - qualifying the discourse of teachers asserting their use of such language

  "*I don't use it daily. From time to time*"
- alignment of personal and professional values - describing the mentioning of the interviewees of a correspondence or discrepancy between their self-understanding inside and outside the classroom

  "*I have not adopted myself on an everyday basis the practice of that*"
- strategies towards students - identifying what teachers are specifically putting into practice in the classroom

  "*I tell students that there is that freedom, too*."

The categories which can be uncovered here are the ones of "gender inclusive language", "identity" and "teaching". The systematization of these processes of coding, which were realized meticulously and always in a retroactive approach based on inductive thinking allowed us to categorize our whole set of data and thus to observe the emergence of categories, and codes which structure our analysis, enabling a comprehensive understanding of teaching practices regarding gender in France and Germany.

Theoretical Concepts Grounded in Literature Review

By entering the academic discourse around social education from a standpoint of gender and taking a critical stance towards institutionalized structures of power, we recognized that the following concepts were going to be indicative of how we needed to further approach our study in order to make meaning of the social phenomena at play (Bryman, 2012, p. 20) in a structured way and to derive answers for our problem area: 'politics and neutrality', 'gender and socialization', 'personal and professional identity', and 'language and performativity' all centered on teaching and the educational field. Starting off with the conceptualization of the influence politics has on education and the social implications of gender, we explore how teacher identity processes these factors among others in its construction and how these three bundled elements come to be expressed in the concluding chapter on performativity through language (see Figure 2).

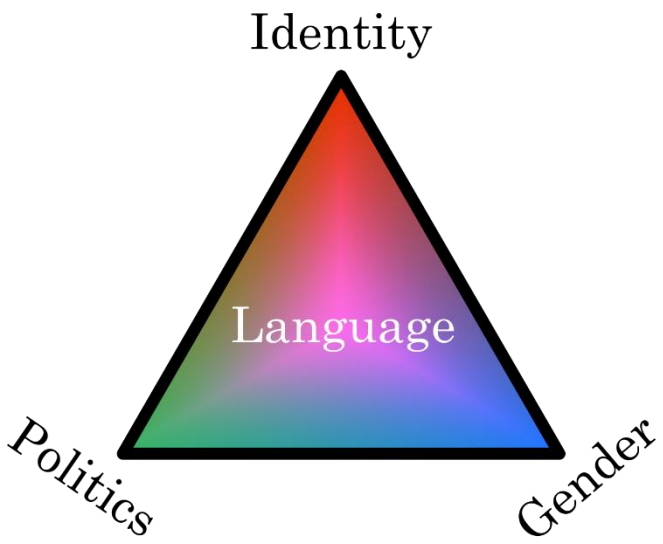

Figure 2. Theoretical key concepts of the research constructing hegemony

We worked on the development of this theoretical lens from within the social constructionist ontological and the interpretivist epistemological framework of our

methodological foundation which we expanded by incorporating the core subjects of the answers our interviewees provided us with. Based on this, we decided to shed light on each of these central subject areas by contextualizing them with relevant literature and delving deeper into concrete theoretical concepts. In this way, we aim to fill in the gap to a certain extent that Rushton et al. (2023) identified between research on educational policy making and the role of teacher identities within (p. 15).

THE DILEMMA OF POLITICS AND (PRETENDED) NEUTRALITY IN EDUCATION

In France and Germany, schools are expected to pursue the mission of apolitical or unbiased education of young citizens despite being overseen by national governments and underlying the political interests of the country's respective legislative orientation (Christ & Dobbins, 2016, p. 359; Stralek & Papa, 2020, p. 127; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 37; Wieland, 2019, p. 1; Young, 2009, pp. 10, 12). In search of the origin of this tension between "*emancipation* and *domination*" (Young, 2009, p. 12), we chose to investigate the purpose of schooling as our starting point, to address the parameter of knowledge in education and its hegemonic importance throughout history with regards to political education, and to review neutrality in teaching (see Figure 3). This introduction to the concept of hegemony serves as a common thread running through the entirety of the research. We then detail this general exposition by looking into civic education and the normalization of democratic values as the socially acceptable way of teaching.

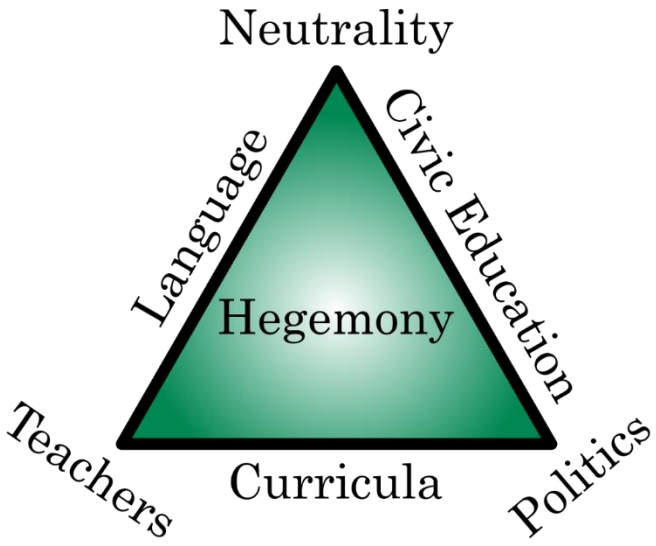

Figure 3. Key Connections: The Dilemma of Politics and (Pretended) Neutrality in Education

Impacts of Hegemonic Power Relations between State and School

Scholars, especially educational theorists conducting research in the field of curriculum studies (Apple, 2013; Au, 2023; Dewey, 2018; Young, 2009), have taken on the task of examining the interplay between society, state and education. These examinations were often conducted within the scope of individual nations, mostly considering the U.S., and its specific historical, cultural and political conditions (Akiba et al., 2023; Dunn et al., 2019; Ferris, 2022; Toloudis, 2012) but we still consider them applicable to our research considering the comparative nature of our research, where we place an emphasis on democratic systems in Western European societies manifested in the European Union with a common legislation (*EU law*, n.d.) built around these beliefs. Following up on Dewey's understanding of education as a necessity for the development of communities (2018, p. 13), Young (2009) observes that the function of schools as sites where education takes place lies in "reproducing human societies and providing conditions which enable them to innovate and change" (p. 10). These communities in society are based on shared common cultural norms and values and structured through a ruling social order which, coming from a critical perspective, can also be seen as a form of control (Apple, 2013, pp. 19-20; Ferris, 2022, p. 50).

In this sense, schools are situated within these belief systems, organized in the shape of institutions by the State, and create as well as reproduce these value systems (Apple, 2013, p. 21). But since schools are supposed to engage in the act of recreating these specific value systemizations determined by society, they act as 'agents' to the principles of hegemony, as contributed by Gramsci (Gramsci, 1996; Apple, 2013, p. 21). The philosopher was especially interested in cultural preservation that is so unconsciously done and that has so deeply saturated the human mind, that people who have internalized the norms cultivated and maintained by the governing powers keep living them, reflecting them and passing them on without even needing to be kept in check by the subjugating group anymore (Apple, 2013, pp. 20-21). This cultural hegemony simultaneously opens up the possibility for solidifying systematic inequalities in fields such as gender and, when applied to educational institutions, affects and influences a highly

susceptible, young audience of students whose role it is to acquire knowledge (Apple, 2013, p. 20; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Burawoy, 2020, p. 68; Young, 2009, p. 10). Therefore, even though this cultural hegemony is not being enacted without reason since "without schools every generation would have to begin from scratch" (Young, 2009, p. 10), it is still important to dissect these day-to-day interactions in schools and the latently dominating lines of thought they have emerged from for change to actually happen (Apple, 2013, pp. 19-20; Young, 2009, p. 10).

The field of tension between states and schools manifests itself in the shape of school curricula where political actors have the upper hand in determining which knowledge to make available to the public (Apple, 2013, p. 19; Au, 2023, p. 13; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 51; Ferris, 2022, p. 44; Mayo, 2014, p. 391; Young, 2009, pp. 13-14). This linkage between national identity and the contents of the curriculum can be seen as a momentary reflection of the State's cultural and political orientation in the way governments deem certain knowledge as "socially *legitimate*" (Apple, 2013, p. 23; Au, 2023, p. 13; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Young, 2009, p. 13). In an attempt to conceptualize the type of knowledge present in the school curriculum, Young (2009) suggests a dual understanding in which this "worthwhile" knowledge can be described as the '*knowledge of the powerful*', thus speaking of knowledge which only an elite social stratum has access to delineate (pp. 13-14). Here, Young follows the Bourdieusian (1979, p. 293) tradition and updates the notion of 'cultural capital' which qualifies the amount of 'powerful' or 'legitimate' culture an individual has. On the other hand, the theorist also sees a need to address the functionality of this predefined knowledge which is why he introduces the concept of '*powerful knowledge*' as a form of "specialist knowledge" (p. 14). '*Powerful knowledge*' which is grounded in state consensus on how to responsibly educate extends upon the learnings of everyday life and exposes students situated in a certain local social environment to a curated set of knowledge (Apple, 2013, p. 24; Young, 2006, p. 20; Young, 2009, pp. 14, 17). What makes '*powerful knowledge*' powerful is that it "provides reliable explanations or new ways of thinking about the world" (Young, 2009, p. 14). This powerful and

State-selected knowledge is enacted by the teachers, who pose as specialized, "street-level actors" (Schulte, 2018, p. 624), who select and "pedagogize" (Young, 2009, p. 14) the complexities of the curriculum in a more digestible way tailored towards their students, and who then impart it on them in a hierarchical manner (Apple, 2013, p. 98). In sum, the policy makers' function as gatekeepers of knowledge, teachers' autonomy in the classroom based on societal trust, the impossibility for students to determine the knowledge they want to interact with, and the overall power imbalances associated with this hierarchical, hegemonic construction we call education swiftly eradicate any initial notions of political impartiality (Ferris, 2022, p. 44; Young, 2009, pp. 14, 17). Presenting '*knowledge of the powerful*' as '*powerful knowledge*' in educational institutions and defining it as the non plus ultra to govern the culturally reproducing society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996) with self-normalizing values (Gomendio, 2023, p. 20) results in a "hidden curriculum that itself is not neutral but universally true" (Ferris, 2022, pp. 46, 50). Even though such all-encompassing world views are mostly associated with dictatorships where the political regimes utilize schools for harmful propaganda in order to fortify their beliefs and interests, cultural hegemony in education presents itself in all types of political organization including democracies as well (Gomendio, 2023, pp. 19-20). With this in mind, Gomendio (2023) points to a fascinating paradox and states that the general public thinks that political parties should come to a consensus about education policies, knowing they play a significant part in the development of educating soon-to-be politically active citizens through their varying sets of belief systems (pp. 19-20). According to the people, education should be free of any political instrumentalization and purely grounded in facts despite being mandated by political parties (Gomendio, 2023, pp. 19-20).

Coming back to the expectation of apolitical schooling in liberal democracies as a way to bypass any political bias raises the question whether neutrality is indeed more preferable (Strandbrink, 2017, pp. 53-54). Although widely believed to be achievable on the basis of maintaining democratic social convention in both France and Germany, apolitical schooling remains a myth (Richards & Phelps,

2020, p. 3; Strandbrink, 2017, pp. 53-54; Wieland, 2019, p. 1). In these two countries, the pretension of political neutrality in nationwide education has largely been debated with regards to religious neutrality and laws on headscarves for teachers and students (*Article L141-5-1…,* 2023; Jones & Braun, 2017; Joppke, 2007; Rosenberger, 2012), but has received little attention in other areas of discrimination. We think that the aspect of gender discrimination in schools is important to study in order to inspect the ways in which cultural reproduction can be challenged (Koyama, 2017, p. 3). Apple (2013) clearly rules out neutrality in education, politicizes schooling and argues that "education [is] not a neutral enterprise, that by the very nature of the institution, the educator [is] involved, whether he or she [is] conscious of it or not, in a political act" (p. 19). Just because teachers make the decision not to position themselves politically in front of their students does not mean that they are engaging in apolitical education (Apple, 2013, pp. 24; Watzlawick et al.,, 1967). In parallel, just because political institutions in liberal democracies are trying to come to a consensus on knowledge promoting a specific social order does not mean that one should disregard the culturally hegemonic and power-laden implications within those claims (Gomendio, 2023, p. 20; Strandbrink, 2017, pp. 53-54). Due to teachers' situatedness as social actors with the task to teach culturally reproduced knowledge makes striving for objectivity a futile undertaking (Apple, 2013, pp. 24-25).

The trajectory therefore changes from the question not about how schools should try to achieve a truly neutral standard to the inquiry on how far party politics should be able to exert their influence on practices of civic education (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 20; Richards & Phelps, 2020, p. 3) and strikingly, also to what extent it is legitimate for them to do so. To understand the tension between State influence and the necessity to uphold certain societal values, we apply Weber's idea of the legitimacy of constraints for the sake of society. He points out that "power means any chance, within a social relationship, to assert one's own will against resistance, regardless of what this chance is based on" (Weber, 1947, p. 28). In our understanding, this implies that although political dominance can

and should be disputed, “some form of authority relations are intrinsic to pedagogy and to schools” (Young, 2009, p. 14). Rather than vilifying power, we acknowledge that it is a necessary, complex way of societal organization (Mayo, 2014, p. 388). This culturally hegemonic structure can be countered through dissent, deliberation and criticality which would open society to change and improvement to accommodate the “experiences and needs of the people” (Stitzlein, 2016, p. 70). Therefore, we arrive at the recognition that democratic values prioritizing civility have come to prevail in Western liberal societies as vehicles for governmental structurization and are being addressed in the classroom under the guise of civic education (Beutel, 2012, p. 7; Hanson & Howe, 2011, p. 1; Isac et al., 2011, p. 315).

Civic Education as Expression of Democratic Value Transmission

Having refuted political impartiality in schooling to being a myth, we are led to wonder why democratic values have been normalized as an acceptable middle ground for civic education in all liberal democracies such as France and Germany (Beutel, 2012, p. 15; Strandbrink, 2017, pp. 35, 37). School as the setting where civic education takes place is particularly relevant because it is “the institution with the most explicit mandate for educating youth about democratic principles and civic participation” (Lenzi et al., 2014, p. 252) and possesses the most power to form citizen identities with a particular political edge (Strandbrink, 2017, p. 36). Although the term ‘civic education’ is often seen as a synonym to ‘political education’ which is confined to learning about matters of politics within the scope of a school subject (Sant, 2021, pp. 3-4), we see it as more of a “cross-curricular theme that is addressed by all teachers regardless of their specialisms” (p. 4; Beutel, 2012, p. 8)

Essentially, civic education is a moral and political attitude which teaches students how to coexist in today's society and to develop a unified skill set of critical thinking, political understanding and social responsibility (Beutel, 2012, p. 8; Isac et al., 2011, p. 315; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 35). Due to compulsory education in both France and Germany, these democratic norms and values reach and have an impact on virtually every person residing there, regardless of their

local social spheres such as their families or their later workplaces (*Die Schulpflicht in Deutschland*, n.d.; Edelstein, 2013; *Les lois scolaires de Jules Ferry*, n.d.; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 36; Tenorth, 2014). Every new generation is fostered, or in other words socialized, within this hegemonic, democratic universality which has a lasting effect on their further development as potentially politicized individuals and on their overall understanding of the world (Strandbrink, 2017, p. 36). Here, we identify another area of tension between where schools are sites for the normalization of democratic values on the one hand, while simultaneously being places where critical minds are built, on the other hand (Stitzlein, 2016, p. 165). The root cause of this dilemma is the value of 'autonomy' which we regard as central to democratic principles (Hanson & Howe, 2011, pp. 1-2) and where we subscribe to the assumption that "the identity of the liberal democratic citizen is normatively independent" (Strandbrink, 2017, p. 37). It warrants that agency, as a capacity to act autonomously, and dissent belong among the standard practices of citizenship (Stitzlein, 2016, p. 165).

As touched upon before, teachers are given the role of transmitters of both '*powerful knowledge*' and '*knowledge of the powerful*' and act as agents of the democratic socialization of their students (Lenzi et al., 2014, p. 252; Young, 2009, pp. 13-14). This means that they are also caught in the dilemma of normatively educating and evoking criticality among their students while being expected to perform professional neutrality (Stitzlein, 2016, pp. 137-138; 143). Mimicking our question of how far party politics are allowed to encroach on matters of education, we also ask ourselves how and when teachers purposefully enact dissent and political transparency in the classroom as a form of micro-activism (Geller, 2020, p. 183; Stitzlein, 2016, pp. 117, 139). Educators have their own critical thoughts and can with these opinions influence what and how they are teaching. This not only challenges the hegemony of policy makers but also leads to the question of legislation effectiveness as a whole (Parkison, 2013, p. 23). Some scholars argue that teachers should propagate a deliberative democratic education standpoint in order for there to be a democratic classroom (Hanson & Howe, 2011; Isac et al., 2011), which is primarily manifested in civic education lectures by reflecting

current societal debates, such as the one around the question of gender which we will delve into now.

GENDER: A MANIFESTATION OF A HEGEMONIC SOCIETY

Building on this understanding of the relationship between politics and education, we are exploring the specific gender topics which can emerge in such settings. Ligozat states that "gender issues in educational research [...] are very related to the political situations in the different countries" (2019, p. 173). In this section, we investigate how gender is created, taught and learned at school and beyond in continuity with the social constructivist tradition. We first investigate socialization processes applied to gender, before complexifying it and gradually expanding our perspective towards its omnipresence in society and its intersections with other factors constitutive of an individual's identity, such as social class or race (see Figure 4).

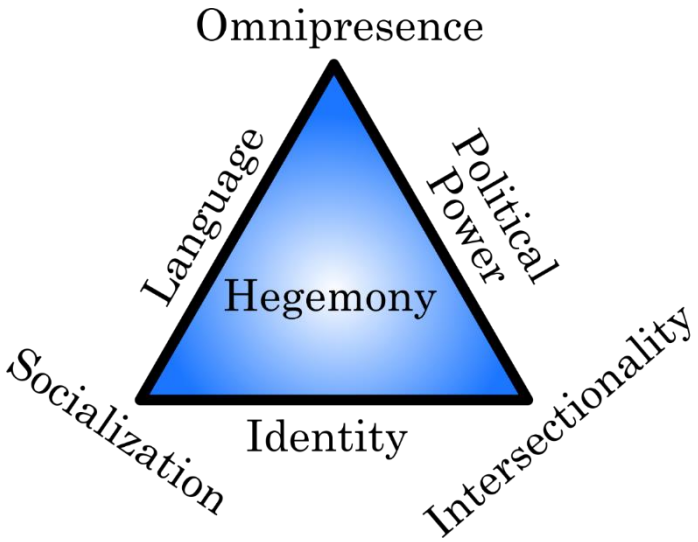

Figure 4. Key Connections: Gender: A Manifestation of a Hegemonic Society

Gender in Socialization

Socialization is the process in which individuals are trained, both consciously and unconsciously, into their culture and learn how to make sense of the world (Damico & Ball, 2019, pp. 1734-1735; DiAngelo, 2016, p. 29; Frønes, 2016, pp. 2-3; Singh, 2021, p. 1), making schools a prominent space of socialization for children, where they are built into who they will be (Biesta, 2015, p. 19; Bourdieu, 1979, p. 22;

Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Saleem et al., 2024, p. 2). Parents and family play a crucial role in the early stages of primary socialization (Leleux, 2000, p. 276), soon followed by educational institutions as mentioned in the previous chapter and the numerous interactions with peers and teachers there (Jamir et al., 2019, p. 316; Miller & Pedro, 2006, p. 294; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 36).

With the variety of dynamics being part of the process in this setting, the attitudes of the different actors might align, or clash, and can compete with what has been learned previously. Lessons learned in the school environment can differ from what is continuously happening at home, especially in working-class families in which the shared culture differs from the 'legitimate' and academic knowledge and behaviors 'of the powerful' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 24; Thin, 1998, p. 93; Young, 2009, pp. 13-14). In such instances, loyalty conflicts can emerge, especially in regard to sensitive topics such as gender identity or sexuality, and be difficult to handle for students, as they are stuck between two different and not necessarily compatible systems of values (Thin, 1998). When different figures of authority have contradictory opinions, relations of power come into play and may have consequences on the development of children and their reception of educational content at school (Thin, 1998, p. 171). Therefore, it is utterly significant for teachers to consider that they have a very diverse audience with children from increasingly varied social and cultural backgrounds (Kirsch, 2017, p. 39; Liu & Evans, 2016, p. 553), and thus to adapt and offer adapted and sensitive practices to ensure the wellbeing in the classroom, theorized in a 'culturally responsive pedagogy' (Sherwood et al., 2021; Caingcoy, 2023), which can be defined as an educational strategy focusing on students' backgrounds and status to offer them a sensitive answer. This aspect has been studied, and previous academic research uncovered practices of differentiated teaching towards boys and girls, despite the democratic ambition supported by public schools (Beutel, 2012, p. 8; Isac et al., 2011, p. 315; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 35). Most of the existing research is centered primarily around students and the gender bias in their achievements and behaviors (Ivinson & Murphy, 2003; Jürges & Schneider, 2011, p. 373; Klapproth et al., 2022, p. 20), the imbalance in gender distribution in the teaching staff

(Aragón et al., 2023), or the differentiation in the choices of career and higher education (Aymans et al., 2020; Coyle & Liben, 2016; DiAngelo, 2016, p. 43; Evans & Diekman, 2009). From this, we understand that learning is not just about knowledge, but also about the formation of an identity (Ivinson & Murphy, 2007, p. 10) and here, we want to switch the focus on individual practices and identity of teachers, and detach ourselves from the evaluation and performance aspect on the students' part.

When talking about gender in socialization processes, we endorse de Beauvoir's dictum that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" and, from there, we examine the process of 'becoming' a woman and, by extension, we propose to extend this approach to all gender identities in the full diversity of their forms. This conception of gender separates it from a biological understanding of 'sex' and follows the ontological tradition of constructionism (Talja et al., 2005, p. 89) we subscribe to. Since gender is not a "set of free-floating attributes" (Butler, 2006, p. 34), it becomes a 'role' which is continuously performed and re-created, and included in socialization processes (Carter, 2014, p. 251; Lorber, 1994, p. 13; Butler, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this regard, we embrace the distinction conceptualized by DiAngelo understanding socialization as both an "homogenization" and "differentiation" of the individuals (2016, p. 7) at different levels. In our case, we understand school as an institution homogenizing the group of children in terms of cultural norms (Apple, 2013, pp. 19-20), while they are also creating a categorization between gendered behaviors to fit into hegemonic norms (Bigler & Leaper, 2015, p. 190). This approach allows us to instill a gendered perspective in our consideration of individual practices and experiences. Indeed, 'belonging' or fitting in a gender category is not an innate or natural characteristic, but is acquired in the very early stages of life and subject to change through time (Lorber, 1994, p. 40). 'Education' in the sense of socialization to gender starts immediately at birth, is prominent in the first years of life of the child and continues throughout life (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 29).

Consequently, as we investigate teachers' practices and identities, it is important to mention that socialization is not a one-way process, but a complex

and ongoing process of learning throughout life (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 29; Frønes, 2016, pp. 2-3; Singh, 2021, p. 4). There is in this sense a 'professional socialization' starting for teachers during their formal training and continuing through their careers which contributes to the development of a 'teacher's identity' (Everit & Tefft, 2019, p. 571; Friesen & Besley, 2013, p. 24; Pohribna, 2022, p. 224). Here, we also approach the concept of 'reverse socialization', defined as "a process where adults acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions from children/young people, that enable them to participate as effective members of groups and the society" by Singh (2021, p. 1) and earlier approached and theorized by various scholars (Bell & Harper, 2020; Foxman et al., 1987; Mead, 1970; Peters, 1985; Wells, 1966), putting emphasis on the reciprocity of the influences between children and adults, in our research pupils and their teachers (Beutel, 2012, p. 8; Isac et al., 2011, p. 315; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 35). However, most of the literature on this process focuses on the family environment, commercial consumption, and environmental concerns (Foxman et al., 1987; Liu et al., 2022; Singh, 2021, p. 1-2; Peters, 1985; Wells, p. 1966). In our research, we decide to apply this concept to educational contexts, where teachers may be influenced by their students. To explore this area, we propose an approach that combines traditional theoretical frameworks - drawing from Bourdieu (1979, 2002) and Butler (2002, 2014) for example - with contemporary insights (DiAngelo, 2016; Singh, 2021), focusing specifically on the reciprocal impacts between teachers' practices and students, with regards to gender and previous experiences and political opinions.

The Omnipresence and Hegemony of Gender

The expression of gender identities situates individuals in a larger system of inequalities (Apple, 2013, p. 20). The social world they evolve and interact in is following an "established order, with its relations of domination" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 1) in which a gender hierarchy takes place and is both producing and consolidating gender (Butler, 2002, p. 12). In this regard, gender is not only at the origin of a differentiation between individuals, but also a hierarchization placing the male identity on top, constituting itself as a factor of hegemony in this

hierarchical arrangement of performed gendered features common to all Western societies (Butler, 2002). "Simultaneously arbitrary, contingent, and also sociologically necessary" (Bourdieu, 2022, p. 2), this structure allows both members of the society and us as researchers to understand the dynamics and the schemes at stake in the social world.

As a continuation, taking into consideration that gender is learnt (Oakley, 1972, p. 173) and schools are by essence places for learning, as well as institutions of socialization, it becomes essential to investigate their intersection. Teaching is about transmitting knowledge, but takes place in a broader societal context which needs to be acknowledged (Sherwood et al., 2021, p. 99). Indeed, schools and educational institutions are places in which children and teenagers meet peers, interact with and are influenced by them (Jamir et al., 2019, p. 316; Miller & Pedro, 2006, p. 294). In our societies, gender identities play a significant role in shaping these interactions. This makes it essential for both teachers and students to express their identities authentically, creating a space where they can interact according to their self-determination (Butler, 2006, p. 129). Therefore, it is crucial for educators to foster an environment that not only respects but also celebrates diverse gender identities, following the idea of a 'culturally responsible pedagogy' (Sherwood et al., 2021; Caingcoy, 2023) and allowing students to explore and embrace who they are without judgment, especially in secondary schools as teenage years are characterized by shifting identities and malleable sense of self (Harter, 2015, p. 322).

This can be attributed to the definition of gender as a "routine ground of everyday activities" (Lorber, 1994, p. 13), very pervasive in society, with no possibility for a gender-neutral system (Apple, 2013, p. 19; Ivinson & Murphy, 2007, p. 6). This transpires in academia with the recent and important development of gender and feminist studies (Butler, 2024; DiAngelo, 2016; Müge Siyez & Beycioglu, 2020), testifying of the fact that gender is specifically situated in society and given a high importance (Butler, 2024, p. 9). More practically, this can be exemplified by the fact that the gender of an individual is often the first thing utilized to describe and interact 'accordingly' with them (Lorber, 1994, p.

14). It is thus impossible to escape gender, and if theories and studies might be saying that it should be an anecdotal consideration, our societies are currently heavily built on this differentiation in a lot of fields: sports competitions, clothing stores, public restrooms, among others. Lorber (1994) insists on the idea that these hegemonic gendering processes and activities are legitimized by "religion, law, science, and the society's entire set of values" (p. 15).

However, this omnipresence makes gender unseeable at times, and only comes to mind when there is noticeable disruption (Lorber, 1994, p. 14) which is the case in the use of an inclusive language, transgressing the 'normal' or generic use of masculine in gendered languages. Gender is thus very apparent in France and Germany through the use of language because French and German are 'gendered languages', i.e. words (nouns, adjectives, verbs…) have feminine and masculine forms, and the use of generic masculine is prominent to address general topics, regardless of their relation to gender (Kricheli-Katz & Regev, 2021, p. 1). Wasserman and Weseley (2009) demonstrate that this difference in grammar has a direct impact on attitudes and behaviors, with the use of such languages promoting sexist attitudes (p. 641). They understand this conclusion as the consequence of the constant differentiation between masculine and feminine necessary when using gendered languages, which might make people more aware of differences between individuals in this matter and so expressing more sexist opinions (Bigler & Leaper, 2015, pp. 187, 189; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009, p. 641). In this context, inclusive language is defined as a "language that avoids bias toward a particular sex or social gender and therefore is less likely to convey gender stereotypes" (UN Women, n.d.). It aims at addressing the gendered shortcomings of language in the matter of inclusion and diversity by using gender-neutral expressions, or both masculine and feminine forms. Gender inclusivity in language is still very recent and studies to measure its efficiency are still emerging (Patev et al., 2019, Sczesny et al., 2015), contradicting the strong political resistances expressed publicly (Borde, 2016, p. 38). Moreover, most strategies implemented to make language inclusive still keep a very strong and limiting binarity (Elmiger, 2018, 2020).

Additionally, considering "feminist movement gained momentum when it found its way into the academy" because the institutionalization of the phenomenon became a tool to spread its ideas (hooks, 2014, pp. 20-21) on a broader scale, the inclusion of gender as a concept in secondary education curricula could bring a similar awakening to the younger students. In education and schools, gender equality is often summarized as the equal chance of girls and boys to "have access to and participate in education [with] equitable learning opportunities and outcomes" (Müge Siyez & Beycioglu, 2020, p. 1691). However, education about the concept of gender itself, understood as a topic which would enable students to grasp the idea that femininities and masculinities are socially constructed and shaping our societies by assigning social roles to individuals (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018) is often disregarded and far more limited. Therefore, in school gender is more often approached through 'real life' experiences than textbook education, and through teaching practices and interactions, hence our research design (Lorber, 1994, pp. 13, 14).

Reframing Gender: Intersectionality and Hegemonic Norms

We draw on feminist scholarship to situate our research in the field of gender studies. Indeed, we are interested in uncovering the social mechanisms shaping society through the complexities of gender and its intersections with other fields, such as race, social class, sexuality, etc. in an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991). Even though both fields are tightly intertwined, we acknowledge their specificities and decide to situate this research in the area of gender studies rather than the feminist field deeply saturated by gendered power relations in both research design and data, to put emphasis on the social interconnections in which gender is prevalent. As a matter of fact, going back to our consideration of the social world as structured around various systems of hierarchies (Bourdieu, 2002, pp. 1-2), we recognize that hegemony extends beyond gender, leading us to use gender as an entry point for understanding broader social phenomena (Bürkner, 2012). Following the conceptualization of intersectionality offered by Crenshaw (1991) to grasp Black women experiences, we extend it to

explain that when discriminations overlap they are at the origin of a unique new status, more complex than a simple combination and must therefore be considered together to get a global picture (Corlett & Mavin, 2014, p. 260; Haschemi Yekani & Nowika, 2022). We do not neglect the importance and prime aspect of gender in approaching social interaction, but decide to understand it in this context as a symptom of the hegemonic society surrounding the individuals (Butler, 2024, pp. 4-5). This perspective also enables us to explore how educational settings are participating in the reproduction of these hierarchies and influencing gendered identities and interactions.

Until now, we approached hegemony through a gendered lens as the masculine domination, in the sense of a hierarchisation between a masculine and a feminine (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 19). However, it is essential to complexify this approach at multiple levels, and including in educational institutions. To begin with, Connell (2014, 2018) theorizes a classification of various identified 'masculinities', explaining that there is a dominant 'hegemonic masculinity' which is not embraced by all members of the larger group who adopt a 'marginalized', 'subordinate', 'complicit' or 'reformed' gender expression and can cause harm (Renold, 2004, pp. 260-261). Cisgender and heterosexual men are heavily favored in society, which also means that any transgression from this norm brings its share of pressure, including in schools where boys have to "do boy" (Renold, 2004, p. 262). Men, while dominant in the gender hierarchy, find themselves in a discriminated position in society in such cases, because of their "failure" to be "real men" regarding some criteria such as their sexual orientation, employment status, disability, or race (Watson et al., 2022, p. 3). Also, both categories of gender can be discussed to overcome the binarity and explore a more comprehensive conception of identities. A more nuanced approach could also involve 'queering' as an analytical lens for a broader exploration of how gender expectations impact different groups, including non-binary and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and recognizes the multiplicity of identities within the spectrum of gender (Butler, 2006).

From there, school as a mechanism of reproduction of the elite is not treating all children the same, both in their own 'gender' category and between

them. The intersection of class, race/ethnicity, and gender lead to different academic and non-academic outcomes, within and between groups and is necessary to study to avoid an essentialization of these inequalities and injustices (Bécares & Priest, 2015, p. 3). Also, the inclusion of this diversity of layers constituting the social identity of individuals are determinant of the heterogeneity which can be observed among a defined group based on one criterion (Qin & Li, 2020; Prix & Kilpi-Jakonen, 2022; Renold, 2004, p. 261; Sassu & Volmar, 2023). On top of this, the competition between hegemonic 'social' norms and 'school' norms can lead to identity conflicts in individuals, with young boys being faced with the divergence of expectations for instance (Martino, 2003, p. 287; Renold, 2004, pp. 261-262). Conclusively, Bürkner (2012) argues that "an integrated, socially re-turned concept of intersectionality will produce a diversified view of the complex manifestations of social inequality and the way they are dealt with in social practice" (p. 191), thus allowing to broaden our scope and understand discriminations at multiple levels and in multiple contexts.

Constantly interacting with their students and participating to shape their gender identities through socialization processes, teachers are in the professional context influential actors standing before their young audience. However, they are also socialized individuals who must navigate the inescapable gendered social norms surrounding them while having a determining power over the students who have already been exposed to differentiated values.

Complicating the Teacher Identity and Self-Image

In the classroom, teachers have to reconcile their professional identities with their private personas, and for them this divide is firmly anchored in the fact that they are representatives of the state with an educational mission while also having their own political ideas (Impedovo, 2021a, p. 2). To showcase how their professional identities are constructed, we therefore must delve deeper into the process of identity formation as a whole and then demonstrate in which way external values merge with individual meaning making (see Figure 5; Fajardo Castañeda, 2013, p. 131; Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 49, 57; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, pp. 183-184).

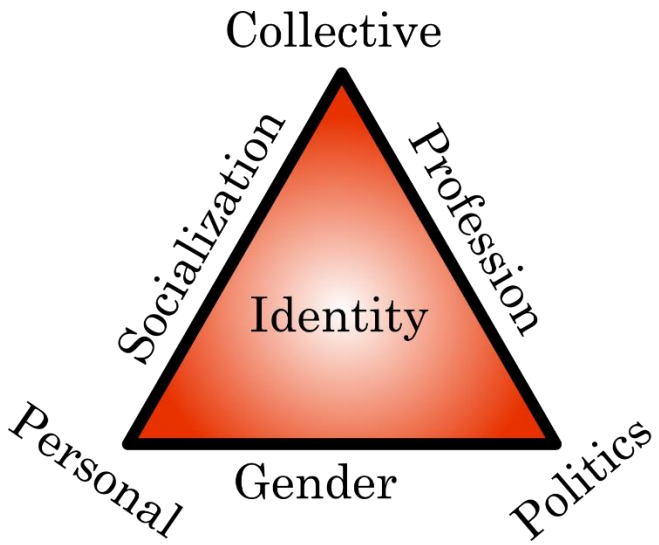

Figure 5. Key Connections: Complicating the Teacher Identity and Self-Image

Socially Determined Construction of Identity

The concept of 'identity', often mentioned in connection with the concept of 'self', has been researched by a multiplicity of scholars across disciplines who have examined the topic from psychological, sociological, and anthropological or critical perspectives (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, pp. 5, 9; Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 49-50; Mockler, 2011, p. 519). Resulting from these efforts is a concept of identity which boils down to a collection of considerable commonalities regardless of the field

(Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, pp. 9-10; Mockler, 2011, p. 519). Our social constructionist and interpretivist stance directed us down the path of sociological tradition which is why we built our theoretical groundwork on the understanding that the development of identities is in dynamic negotiation with social circumstances (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 9; Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 144). Here, we are strongly influenced by the work of Goffman (1959) who pioneered sociology on a micro level by centering individuals and their everyday interactions with their social surroundings in the likes of other individuals or government bodies (Laustsen et al., 2017, pp. 144, 146). In his theoretical and analytical contemplations, the sociologist draws on the findings of his research related predecessors such as Cooley (1922), who penned the concept of the 'looking-glass-self' where an individual's sense of 'self' collects social norms and values over time (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, pp. 9-10; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 50; Fajardo Castañeda, 2013, p. 131; Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 146; Raab, 2022, pp. 65, 67-68). He also took Mead's (1972) idea of interactionism a step further, who made a distinction between the directing 'self' or in other words 'object' with its accumulated, intrinsic values and the acting 'I' or 'subject' which presents these beliefs in a conscious way and pondered their connection in interaction with its social surroundings (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, pp. 9-10; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 50; Raab, 2022, pp. 65-66). Goffman, however, thought 'self'-hood synonymous with 'identity' because of the way individuals evaluate their social surroundings and adapt to them which expanded this singular vision 'identity' proposed by Cooley and Mead to a multiplicity of identities within one individual (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 51; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 54; Day et al., 2006, p. 602; Raab, 2022, p. 66). When applying this theory to our topic of research, Goffman helps us understand and conceptualize the way that teachers are able to unite their personal and professional identities within one common 'identity' which is able to adjust to the affordances of their social circumstances.

The social scientist also emphasizes how the awareness of others around the individual who may have their own set of beliefs has an influence on the construction of the individual's identity and ascribes people a certain level of

consciousness when communicating (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 10; Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 49-50; Laustsen et al., 2017, pp. 145-146; Raab, 2022, p. 68). It is the outward interaction with 'otherness', the simultaneous process of sense-making with the help of one's own values or experiences, and the corresponding act of differentiation which causes personal identity development through self-evaluation and thus individualization (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 50-51; Laustsen et al., 2017, pp. 144-145; Mockler, 2011, p. 519). To illustrate an example of individual identity formation relevant to our study and to provide an elevated, more contemporary, and critical picture of our understanding of identity, we tie in the socio-cultural conception of 'gender identity' as one constituting element that forms identity as whole (Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 186) and is inherent to every individual as part of the first phase of their socialization (Lorber, 1994, p. 40; DiAngelo, 2016, p. 29). In this regard, we deem it appropriate on the basis of their approach to the outward expression of identity to merge Goffman's interpersonal conception of social identity formation (Brickell, 2022, p. 264; Raab, 2022, p. 83) with the broader concept of social theorist Butler (2014) whose work focuses on matters of gender, its physicality, the repeated and performed iterations of identity and power relations (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 10; Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 180). The gender scholar summarizes all these factors in the following quote: "As imaginary, the ego as object is neither interior nor exterior to the subject, but the permanently unstable site where that spatialized distinction is perpetually negotiated [...]. Hence, identifications are never simply or definitively *made* or *achieved*; they are insistently constituted, contested, and negotiated" (Butler, 2014, p. 76). The combined takeaway of these two theorists therefore resides in the permanent redefinition of identity in an interplay with their surroundings.

Expanding Social Identity into the Professional Context of Teaching

Academic discourse surrounding the professionalization of identity in the field of teaching mainly centers around the topics of 'classroom talk' (Fajardo Castañeda, 2013, Sunderland, 2000) and 'self-efficacy' or 'agency' (Impedovo, 2021b;

Marschall, 2022; Olsen, 2016) to name a few (Rushton et al., 2023, pp. 11-13; Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, p. 186). Since our study is concerned with the self-understanding of teachers but also the influence politics have on them and their teaching practices with regards to gender, we chose to proceed with the critically charged discussions about identity we entered with Butler (2014) and to embrace a political slant on teacher identity as proposed by the educational scholars Zembylas & Chubbuck (2018). Our literature review has revealed that this political standpoint on teacher identity which centers on the intersection of politics, identity and language has been researched only by a handful of scholars (Carswell & Conway, 2023; Clarke, 2009; Mockler, 2011; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, 2018) and gives us the chance to add to this body of knowledge by concretely addressing and exposing underlying structures of power teachers in France and Germany must encounter and negotiate (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 57; Rushton et al., 2023, p. 18). They argue that the act of meaning making that forms an identity through the constant negotiation of social interactions, whether harmonious or dissonant with their own beliefs, is permeable to mechanisms of power and thus, politically entrenched (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, pp. 174-175). Adopting this approach allows us to conceptualize how macro level politics play out and are negotiated and performed on the interpersonal micro level, the latter being the focal point of our research (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, pp. 189-190).

According to the two social theorists, teacher identity is "a dynamic, career-long process of negotiating the teacher-self in relation to personal and emotional experiences, the professional and social context, and the micro and macro political environment" (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, p. 174) which complements our aforementioned clarifications on identity formation as a whole (Mockler, 2011, p. 518). To detangle Zembylas' & Chubbuck's definition, we will explain and follow their binary analytical framework of examining "both *context* and *practice*" (2018, pp. 189-191) in our interview transcripts. In the first step of the model, we must historicize the components contributing to the unitary identity of a teacher which were shaped under certain circumstances in the person's past and are still being reiterated in the present. Here, we can examine the self-understanding of teachers

through their claims about themselves and their overall aspirations as teachers (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 149-150; Mockler, 2011, p. 518). To support our analysis and discussion, we contextualized the backgrounds of our interviewees by adding a detailed case description which will follow this theoretical chapter, and situates our interpretations of the data. Similarly to the way we explained identity development in the previous chapter, teacher's identities are formed by interaction and distinction with other social actors in the likes of other teachers or students within the school context (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 150-151). Another parameter heavily influencing the way teachers form their identities is the school itself as an institutionalized place of power and its situatedness in the national context of France and Germany (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 49, 51). Not only the students but also teachers go through the processes of secondary socialization and identification here (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 43). This setting, which is being both explicitly and latently perceived by the teachers, is predefined by education policy makers who most prominently set the standards for curricula as well as many other things in the realm of education and the management at the school commanding more daily scenarios such as teaching schedules (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 51-52; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, p. 175). In sum, teachers have a certain amount of leeway in constructing who they are in the school surroundings they find themselves in thanks to their own level of 'agency' but are still limited by the constraints posed by the institutionalized environment among other power dynamics and social orders they have absorbed into their subconsciousness (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 53, 57).

But what makes the teaching identity unique, is that it does not clearly separate, but it rather blurs the lines of the relationship between personal and professional identity in a Goffmanian manner (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 149-151; Mockler, 2011, p. 518; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, p. 190). Teachers are constantly in the process of negotiating their personal values and their identity within the scope of professional values imposed on them by societal expectations (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 36, 49-50; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, p. 177). At this point, it is important to acknowledge and to emphasize though, that teachers'

practices and beliefs are not just "product[s] of their professional identity" (Mockler, 2011, p. 517). We concede that teachers are "humans" who in their identity construction and expression through practices draw on their life experiences as a whole and not just from school (Mockler, 2011, p. 518). Examples of this socializing personal repertoire of identifications could be their gender, their national background, their own experience as a student, and their familial status among many others (Leleux, 2000, p. 276; Mockler, 2011, pp. 520-521). Because we move with Goffman beyond a binary understanding of teacher identity, the political view on it can then help us as researchers holistically detect the underlying political power relations in teacher identity without stripping it of its complexity (Mockler, 2011, p. 518; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, p. 190). Coming back to the initial phase of the political framework, we must also trace the way teachers thematically structure the discourse about their identities and break down embedded power structures in these discourses which are "a site of social control as well as resistance" (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, p. 190). It is our task to analyze what picture the teacher paints of themselves through discourses and the practical implications these are expressed through.

This is why, in the second step of the theoretical framework, we need to observe and meticulously dissect the ways politics, culture and values manifest themselves directly in the teacher's actions and in the teaching practices within their national and organizational contexts (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 53; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, p. 190). To find suitable answers to this task, we can focus on teacher's decisions to either follow, expand upon or to oppose predefined norms and guidelines at schools based on their own set of values and beliefs (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 36, 57, 78). We must also keep in mind what (sub-)conscious effects their surroundings such as students, school officials and other social actors have on how they choose to teach or communicate with them (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, pp. 9, 51; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 54; Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 144; Raab, 2022, p. 67). This entanglement of identity, control of perception, also referred to as 'impression management', and performativity is in line with Butler's and Goffman's concept of identity (Laustsen et al., 2017, pp. 147-148), to which Mockler (2011) adds from a

perspective of professionalization that "professional identity has a 'performative edge': the process of 'storying' and 'restorying' has the effect of both claiming and producing professional identity" (p. 519).

THE TEACHING PERFORMANCE, A DISCURSIVE ACTIVITY

Identity is performed and negotiated in discourse (Fajardo Castañedo, 2013, p. 134; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, p. 185), and emerging in social interaction. In this section, we consolidate the various concepts mentioned above to examine how they are conveyed in discourse, through the use of language, and how teachers authentically navigate power dynamics in the classroom through this meaning-making process (see Figure 6).

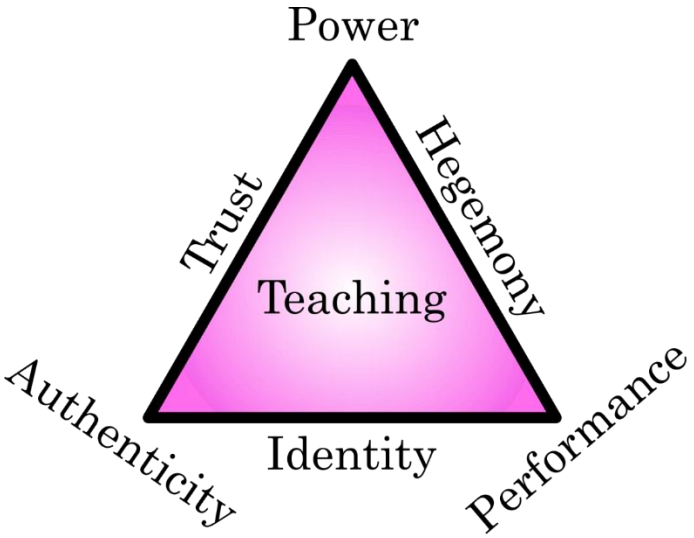

Figure 6. Key Connections: The Teaching Performance, A Discursive Activity

The Authority of Language in Reproducing Hegemony

'Discourse' is a term widely used in academia which is defined by Gee (2014) as "language in use", or as well as "a part of language" (p. 17). Discourse is multi-faceted, constituted by various elements participating in meaning-making processes. In this tradition, language can be thought of as an embodiment of discourse and a medium through which individuals articulate thoughts, ideas, concepts and reflections. 'Language' is a polysemic term, one of its definitions being "a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings" (*Language*, n.d.). We focus here on 'language in use' as it is constitutive of social

interactions and identities following the Goffmanian tradition. If language itself is interesting and can be studied, we decided to center our research on its utilization by teachers, in regard to our social constructionist perspective (Talja et al., 2005, p. 89). We follow the idea that practices, and languages practices, are "what we do in particular contexts with a particular history" (Ivinson & Murphy, 2007, p. 58), because "language-using is paradigmatically a social, public act, talking (and writing and signing) must be carried on with reference to norms" (Cameron, 2012, p. 2). Language is thus a multifaceted way to express oneself and "humans do not just use language, they comment on the language they use" (Cameron, 2012, p. 1) and on the language others use, making it a criteria of differentiation in a stratified society (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 44-45; DiAngelo, 2016, p. 7). Language is always the result of a succession of (un)conscious choices: when to speak, what to say, how to say it, also framing the ideas behind it and facilitating some thought processes, reinforcing the hegemony of gender for instance (Bigler & Leaper, 2015, pp. 187, 189; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009, p. 641). On a side note, we also need to remember that language is not only text or spoken words, but is constituted of various and diverse elements such as movements and silences among others. Body language in the classroom, for instance, has been a research topic for various researchers (Kucuk, 2023; White & Gardner, 2013) and was proven to have an equally important impact on the interactions at stake in this setting.

Reminiscing on Young's conceptualization of a '*knowledge of the powerful*' (2009, pp. 13-14), we link this idea to the practices themselves and the 'language in use' we evoke here to highlight the existence of an 'legitimate' language singled out by Bourdieu (1991). Even though there is a multiplicity of languages, "*the* language" is in a similar way the one which "imposes itself on the whole population as the only legitimate language" and is produced by, among others, teachers who are the ones in charge of "the task of incalculating its mastery" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45). In this regard, and as we have seen that language is culturally embedded and situated, it intersects and interacts with power relations. In this regard, language can create violence and has a significant impact on people. Here, it

becomes particularly instructive to explore the idea of 'symbolic violence' theorized by Bourdieu (1991), in the school context giving teachers the opportunity and thus the responsibility to not hurt their audience and their students by making an abusive use of this power conferred by their ownership of language (hooks, 1994, p. 168). He explains through this conceptualization that language is reproducing and re-enacting in every interaction the inequalities between individuals (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 54), more specifically making schools, and educational institutions, areas in which power, language and discipline coincide (Cushing, 2021, p. 24). The societal hierarchies are embodied and perpetuated in language, through specific uses of syntax and vocabulary, and participate in their expansion. As an example, "masculine prevails over feminine"[5] (see Figure 7) is a popular and widely spread saying in French schools during grammar lessons (Borde, 2016, p. 9) and is immediately implying a hierarchy between genders. Indeed, this grammatical concept can be extended to broader societal settings, following Wittgenstein's conviction that 'the limits of language are the limits of our world' (2010, p. 74) and reinforce them continuously (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 54; 2002, pp. 13-14), which adheres to social constructionist perspectives. Therefore, language and 'language in use' have strong and indubitable influences on individuals, both speaker and receiver, and are intimately tied to power. In this regard, even though 'language in use' expresses power, it is also possible to claim it as a space of resistance (hooks, 1994, p. 169) and make words a "counter-hegemonic speech" to liberate oneself (p. 175) as a form of agency.

[5] *Le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin* - referring to the idea that the masculine form is used as a generic form in French

Figure 7. "Masculine prevails over feminine" - French grammarbook illustration, retrieved from https://www.slate.fr/story/151880/masculin-emporte-toujours-feminin, May 2024.

Language produces and reproduces power, and "power produces, it produces reality" (Foucault, 1979, p. 194, cited in Ball, 2013, p. 106). More specifically in an educational context, power can be seen as "the teacher's ability to influence students to do something they would not have done had they not been influenced" (Kearney et al., 1984, p. 725). Therefore, when language practices are changing, as in the case of inclusive writing for example, it affects individuals in how they communicate but also more broadly in how they situate themselves in the society which in the case of teachers expresses itself in how they 'do gender' (Swann, 2008, p. 638; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In this regard, we can come back to the idea of 'performing gender' developed by Butler (2002), to put it in relation with the performative identity of Goffman's theories (Brickell, 2022, p. 264), which correlate in this sense and offer an understanding of the tension between the personal and the professional self in a discursive way. Through language and its power dimension, individuals can situate themselves in the larger social world and the hierarchies shaping it. Numerous studies have been published on the use of language by students, for example with questions on the repertoires used and speaking time allocations on a gendered basis (Aguillon et al., 2020; Ballen et al., 2017; Tatum et al., 2013). Here we move towards the teachers' side of the story, where it is crucial to acknowledge the authority held by them as the 'powerful' figure of the interaction (Koutrouba et al., 2012, p. 185), which translates in a characteristic responsibility of teachers towards their students to not abuse this

invisible 'symbolic power' they have (Brady, 2022, p. 106; Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164; Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011; Uitto, 2011, p. 274). "Schooled language" is then the legitimate language through which knowledge is transmitted, classroom organized and discipline instaurated, reinforcing hegemonic norms and marginalizing individuals transgressing them (Swann, 2008, p. 624). Conclusively, the language teachers use, along with the power they hold, is multi-dimensional and creates a singular environment, subjected to tensions and with intersected dynamics in which they have to position themselves.

The Centrality of Language in Teaching Performances

With their ownership of language in the classroom, teachers are the main actors at school and always play an important role (Makovec, 2018, p. 33). Today, they are no longer only asked to transmit knowledge (Holt-Reynolds, 2000, p. 22), but to perform and develop broader pedagogical strategies to educate students in a democratic way. However, this is historically a source of conflict in the academic field of education, with opposing opinions between researchers insisting on the fact that politics and education should stay fully disconnected, while others argue that 'educating democracy' is the duty of those in power (Danoff, 2012, p. 117; Johnson & McElroy, 2010, p. 140). In both cases, educators are the intermediate between concepts and students.

In this regard, and following our interactionist tradition, teachers are just like "a child [who] will act somewhat differently at home and at school" (Bronfenbrenner & Cole, 1979, p. 109) and are developing specific roles in the educational context. Makovec (2018) specifies that the emergence of a 'teacher role' is the result of both external and internal factors, the latter one being a combination of "the teacher's own beliefs about which role is important and the teacher's expectations for his or her role" (p. 33). This idea perfectly combines the conceptualizations of Goffman (1959) and Butler (2002, 2014), putting interactions and performance at the center of identity-shaping processes, with a prominent dimension of self-understanding in the definition of this role.

Therefore, and based on this definition, teachers must embrace this role. We adopt here another one of Goffman's ideas who proposes a dramaturgical approach when it comes to any social interaction, placing teachers on a stage in the classroom (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 54; Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 51). According to his understanding of a plurality of identities, people tend to draw on specific aspects of themselves, sometimes more intentionally than others, depending on their interpretation of the social circumstance and follow scripts in order to convey who they are through playing a role (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, pp. 9, 51; Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 54-55; Laustsen et al., 2017, pp. 144, 147-148, 184-185; Raab, 2022, p. 67). These teacher roles are emitted through the societally prescribed and thus, power-laden, discursive practices of language which we see as constructing reality (Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 158; Talja et al., 2005, p. 89). Due to the specific and stage-like setting of the classroom, "effective teaching" becomes a mix between education and entertainment, giving a large part to the performative aspect of the role to engage with the students (Johnson & McElroy, 2010, pp. 3, 4). Teaching is in this sense a very codified example of everyday performance, making it a conscious act for teachers when they enter the classroom.

When talking about embracing roles, it is then essential to prevent any instance of 'bad faith', defined by Sartre as manifesting when individuals opt to embrace societal roles, values or beliefs diverging from their authentic selves, thus leading to a kind of 'self-deception' and an "antithesis of authenticity" (Brady, 2022, pp. 95-96). This comes to play with teachers as they are divided between a personal and a professional identity which might compete (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, pp. 174-175). Occurrences of bad faith imply a self-consciousness about this lack of honesty, challenging the expression of a satisfactory identity. A form of self-responsibility is emerging here, for individuals to ensure the good expression of 'who they are' and prevent potentially harmful dissonances for themselves. However, honesty and transparency in behaviors is also a multi-level concern, as "children [and students] thrive on sincerity" and can easily assess the difference between genuine and acted practices (Miller & Pedro, 2006, p. 296). Brady (2022) argues that Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' needs to be complexified in the

classroom, as embracing a role in not a negative thing in itself but should be an actively reflexive and responsive enterprise (pp. 107-108). There is thus an intense challenge for teachers, to pick and act their role while being sincere with their audience of students, in the best interest of both parties.

Following our critical path, it becomes essential to put this role-play in perspective by investigating its limitations and correlations with the broader environment teachers are evolving in. Indeed, this professional performance differs from theater in the sense that they are 'breaking the fourth wall', and in constant relationship with the students. The teacher-student relationship is an interpersonal interaction (Bainbridge Frymier & Houser, 2009, p. 207), as well as the intersection of different specialist roles (Brady, 2022, p. 105). This connection differs from what could be described as the 'traditional' building of an interpersonal association by its time constraints and its lack of equality, both typically associated with the emergence of a friendship (Bainbridge Frymier & Houser, 2009, p. 208). In this regard, classrooms are spaces in which power is displayed, shared and confronted between students and teachers through discourse (Bainbridge Frymier & Houser, 2009, p. 208; Bourdieu, 1991; Cornelius & Herrenkohl, 2004; Uitto, 2011, p. 274; Wong, 2016, p. 250) in a relational manner (Bingham, 2008, p. 9) and challenging hegemony. Indeed, there is a legitimate power taking place here (Jamir et al., 2019, p. 317; Koutrouba et al., 2012, p. 185) which acknowledgment by the participants is necessary for effective interactions between them. Effective mobilization of this power requires a performative act of these specialist roles.

Teachers' performances are determined by the discursive practices that connect them to their students, making 'language in use' the origin of their power in the classroom. In this regard, this role-play must be conducted in an authentic and reflexive way to ensure effectiveness in these interactions.

STATE OF THE ART

Situating this study in the intersection of the field of educational and gender studies, we extensively explore pre-existing literature regarding education as our topic of interest and ground our theory in this research available to us. We identify a gap in the intersection between the trifecta of politics, identity and teaching approached through a gendered lens (see Figure 2; Rushton et al., 2023, p. 15). While addressing controversial or sensitive issues such as gender in the classroom, we notice a focal point of study on the reactivity of teachers to unplanned events (Aho et al., 2010; Cassar et al., 2023; Kasperski & Yariv, 2022). From there, we bring innovation both in the concepts and the object of study. Aligning with our methods, we are investigating the teachers' own reflections on their everyday practices by combining major conceptualizations of the social world (Bourdieu, Butler, Goffman, Gramsci) and more specialized educational studies (Apple, Makovec, Young, Zembylas & Chubbuck). This research enables us to examine how the agency of teachers is impacting the implementation of policies, offering an evaluation of their potential of influence on the students who they target as fully fledged citizens to be.

CASE DESCRIPTION

We drew the lines around our research cases along the national borders of France and Germany and focused on their cultural implications and their respective policies (Liamputtong, 2020, p. 224). Considering education systems are the results of specific national cultures and contexts (Rogers, 2004, p. 13), we decided to start the analytical section of this project with a brief review and explanation of the legislative and cultural frameworks on the macro level in which the two studied educational systems are embedded (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, p. 190). The decision to look into the specific policies regulating schools and institutions came from our focus on the politicization and neutrality of teachers in their practices, which makes an analysis in the light of the global context sensible. Finally, in light of our hermeneutic considerations, this section aims to offer a deeper cultural understanding of both cases to situate our analysis and cater towards enhanced validity (Bryman, 2012, pp. 560-561).

CONTEXTUALIZING THE FRENCH CASE

A 'Universal' Republican School

France is a highly centralized state when talking about education (Cornu, 2015; Dobbins, 2014, p. 283; Toloudis, 2012), organized in 30 *'académies',* corresponding to 'educational regions' responsible for teachers' evaluation and managed by a representative of the Minister appointed by the State (Cornu, 2015, p. 290). Education became mandatory for all children from 6 to 13 in 1882, with the Ferry's laws making primary school free and secular at the same time (*Les lois scolaires de Jules Ferry*, n.d.), and extended to secondary school in the 1930s (Jeantheau & Johnson, 2019, p. 290). The 2019 'school of trust' laws of Blanquer (Minister of Education at the time) lowered the compulsory entry age to 3 (*LOI N° 2019-791…*, n.d.), which corresponds to 'pre-school'. Secondary education, which is at the center

of this research, is separated into 'lower' and 'higher', the former implying no selection at all in respect to the 'collège unique' (*unique school*) doctrine, and the latter with a distinction between students to lead them towards general, vocational, or technical education (O'Brien, 2007, p. 7; see Appendix 2). In upper secondary education, or high school (*lycée*), highly differentiated elective courses are offered to the students (O'Brien, 2007, p. 7), with its modalities changing over time (Jeantheau & Johnson, 2019, p. 298). For the sake of understanding, we can mention here the changes from defined 'streams' to more free choice of electives and a continuous evaluation instead of the final exam, between the time the researchers were in high school and the realization of this study (Jeantheau & Johnson, 2019, pp. 297-298). We focus in this project on 'lycée général' (*general high school*), the most academic one, and offering the possibility to continue with higher education in universities.

Even though there is supposedly no distinction between the institutions for a same level of education, a form of "horizontal stratification" between institutions or streams at the same education level exists (Herbaut, 2019, p. 537), based on the options offered, or the districts they are located it, due to a strong spatial and residential segregation (Courtioux & Maury, 2020, p. 866; McAvay, 2018, p. 1509). Indeed, public schools are organized in France according to a 'school map' (*Carte Scolaire*) allocating students to a specific school, based on their home address (Courtioux & Maury, 2020, p. 867). Some strategies have been implemented over the years to escape this distribution of people, with exemptions for specific electives for example, but implies a previous knowledge on its method and/or a selection based on grades for the students. Despite the school map organization pretending to create heterogeneous and diverse classes, the system is far from perfect and saw the emergence of *'ZEP'* (Priority Education Zones) in 1982, later replaced by *'REP'* and *'REP+'* (Priority Education Network). This new organization in networks links primary and lower middle school together, therefore making them share this specific status. The classification is based on several indicators, both at school level, with test results, grade repetition and diploma, and on a socio-economic level, with rate of unemployment and share of foreigners for example

(O'Brien, 2007, p. 22). Even though this legally implies more budget assigned to these institutions, it is also putting a 'stigma' on them leading to more teachers and parents trying to avoid them (O'Brien, 2007, p. 23).

This research only focuses on public schools, as the private schools might have different conditions depending on their contracts or not with the State, and are also a way for individuals to extract themselves from this 'school map'. Back to public education, curricula are made on a national level, and reflect both political involvement in education and a certain instability of politics, as they are reorganized regularly. O'Brien (2007, p. 11) highlights the idea that school's principals have a limited scope of action in their schools; if they might have an eye on teaching methods and organization, teachers are hired at a national level (Alonso-Sainz & Thoilliez, 2021, p. 77; Cornu, 2015, p. 290) and managed by regional entities, where the budget is also settled. In the global picture, teachers are civil servants recruited with a competition system, which means they can be appointed in any school of the French territory, based on a selection of criteria including, but not limited to, personal wishes (Cornu, 2015, p. 290). This system is reinforcing the inequalities between 'privileged' and attractive schools and the others, such as REP/REP+ as mentioned earlier. Most of the teachers' education focuses on in-depth knowledge of their specific topic, as they teach only one (Cornu, 2015, p. 290), and less on classroom situations, something that teachers themselves have been deploring (O'Brien, 2007, p. 15) However, teachers' education is tending to become more professional, despite intense debates surrounding this, with successive reforms encouraging a training outside of disciplinary knowledge, as a good teacher is not only an expert in its field but also a pedagogue (Cornu, 2015, p. 293), making students future citizens.

In this regard, and going back to the notion of 'universality', it seems important to mention that France is a "color-blind society by law" (Léonard, 2014, p. 68), i.e. it is illegal for public institutions (such as schools), as well as private organizations, to request, collect and hold information about ethnicity or racial categories. However, it appears far from being 'gender-blind'. Gender-mixity in French schools started slowly and progressively in the 20th century, only being

officialized in 1975 with the Haby reform (Pezeu, 2014, p. 1). Currently, public education chose the idea of 'equality of chances', meaning that focus is put on offering everyone the same opportunities, as one of its cornerstones, with the ideal of a universal education. More specific to our research, and more generally in the French society, Macron[6] has proclaimed tackling violence against women, and more global equality between women and men, 'the great cause' of his presidential mandates (*L'égalité Entre Les Femmes Et Les Hommes…*, n.d.). This concern comes into question with the debates on inclusive writing in official texts and schools.

Navigating Legislative Boundaries: Challenges and Debates

In their quality of civil servants, teachers have to follow a specific set of rules regarding their practices, both on and off the job. Official texts indeed assert that they are subject to the duties of reserve and neutrality (Kahn, 2006, p. 105; *Devoirs de réserve, …*, n.d.) and public education follow the deontological principle of 'secularism' (Leleux, 2000, p. 278), historically letting the family have the role to educate children to 'values' (p. 277). These recommendations act as limitations to the fundamental freedom of speech of all individuals, and are therefore highly debated and controversial (Lemmens & Demeuse, 2021, p. 167). The 'duty of reserve' emerged in 1935 with a jurisprudence, and stays quite blurry regarding its scope and frame (*Devoirs de réserve…*, n.d.). Indeed, the duty of reserve is defined as "the requirement for all civil servants to exercise reserve and moderation in expressing their personal opinions orally and in writing", while the neutrality aspect prevents them from "manifesting their religious, philosophical or political beliefs to users and colleagues, or expressing a preference for a particular religion" (*Devoirs de réserve, …*, n.d.). Most of the literature, research and debates focus on religion and secularity, a founding principle of the Republic in France since 1905 (*Loi Du 9 Décembre 1905…,* n.d.).

[6] Emmanuel Macron, current President of France, elected in 2017 and re-elected in 2022

Most of the legal framework surrounding this project will be based on two of Blanquer's[7] laws, the 'school of trust' (*Ecole de la confiance*) of 2019 (*LOI N° 2019-791…*, n.d.) and the inclusive language bill of 2021 (*Règles de féminisation…*, n.d.). To begin with, the 2019 project was aiming for a more 'republican school', requiring for example the display of a French flag in each classroom, prohibiting any "attempts at indoctrination" in and around schools (*LOI n° 2019-791…,* n.d.), demonstrating that politics has penetrated the world of education. Students are also affected by these regulations, with the reiteration of the prohibition of wearing any religious sign inside schools (*Article L141-5-1…,* 2023). As of 2017, inclusive language was banned from all official governmental and public transcriptions (*Circulaire du 21 novembre 2017…*, n.d.). Considering teachers are civil servants, it makes sense to investigate its repercussions in schools. If they were in theory obliged by this first law, a field-specific bill was passed in 2021 to detail the tolerated uses of language in school (*Règles de féminisation…*, n.d.). Reiterating the importance of equality between girls and boys, this law encourages the use of double nomination (use of both male and female versions of the word), while prohibiting the use of the typographic sign "·", used to simplify the writing. As an example, addressing students should be done saying '*les étudiantes et les étudiants'* but cannot be written '*les étudiant·e·s'* according to this legislation (*Règles de féminisation…*, n.d.). This was not accepted easily, and led to strong reactions from individuals and unions (*Circulaire Blanquer Contre L'écriture Inclusive…,* n.d.).

A Diverse Set of Six Participants from France

In this setting, we chose to interview six French participants between March 28th and April 17th, who teach in secondary education in the south-western Occitania region. We founded our selection of interviewees on various criteria to ensure a diversity of subjects taught, gender, age and experience (see *Table 1*). These

[7] Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister for Education, Youth and Sports under Edouard Philippe and Jean Castex governments, from 2017 to 2022

teachers, despite their geographical proximity, were all chosen because they teach in different institutions of both the Tarn and Haute-Garonne departments, and are all members of the same '*académie'* (or educational region). This mix enables us to limit external factors of influence in the differences between individuals, as regional cultures and habits can have an impact on personal practices and identities (Bourdieu, 1979). Going back to the local repartition of students in schools, this diversity ensures a similar variety in the body of pupils these teachers have encounter regarding their social backgrounds and previous experiences, with one school being in a REP area and another one being in the center of a bigger city, thus with a much more privileged audience. Two of the teachers are teaching in lower secondary education, three in upper secondary, and one in both upper secondary and higher education, offering a broader perspective and opening a door towards more extensive research. Situated at the limits of our criteria to select participants, her academic experience on gender contributed to giving us a rich plurality of perspectives on this topic, hence her participation in the project.

RESEARCH CONTEXT FOR THE CASE OF GERMANY

The second case to contrast the French case and to complete our comparative research design with is that of the Federal Republic of Germany (Liamputtong, 2020, p. 221). Similarly to the structure of the previous chapter on France, we set the scene for our analysis by focusing on the organization and the inner workings of the school system, the legal framework for teachers, and the profiles of our interviewees while also adapting to the context and the specificities of education in Germany.

The Stratified School System

Germany is a federally structured country which distributes its governmental power across sixteen states (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 19). These states are all ruled by sub-national governments and have the authority to decide in which way to structure their schools, their educational orientations and details about compulsory schooling (*Die Schulpflicht in Deutschland*, n.d.; Edelstein, 2013; Riedel et al., 2010, p. 95). School in Germany became universally mandatory as of the year of 1919 as one of the "essential components of a democratic social and educational constitution" (Tenorth, 2014). Since then, the obligatory school attendance has been determined by the age of the child and in Germany usually starts at the age of six and ends at sixteen (*Die Schulpflicht in Deutschland*, n.d.; Edelstein, 2013; Tenorth, 2014). Overall, the education system underlies a certain basic structure in terms of school type, level of degree and the further educational opportunities these lead to (Edelstein, 2013). Due to these "distinct educational tracks and the early academic selection" (Nikolai et al., 2017, p. 114), Germany can be considered a representation of a stratified school system. The choice of schools, however, is often not up to the children themselves or their capabilities but rather influenced by the socioeconomic circumstances of their upbringing, causing social divides (Riedel et al., 2010, pp. 97, 118). This segregation happens on the basis of several factors: Firstly, the geographic location, where school district lines are especially relevant in rural areas with less school variety, or in

economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with less opportunity for social mobility, secondly, the school reputation which is influenced by the social backgrounds of the students attending, and thirdly, the parental social standing which forms their decision making (Riedel et al., 2010, pp. 97, 118). For German students this means that after completing 'Kindergarten' and four years of elementary school, they are confronted with the decision of their secondary educational track (Nikolai et al., 2017, p. 114; see Appendix 2). Here, the following three paths open up before them: The 'Hauptschule' or also 'main school' is the shortest type of mandatory schooling in the country and prepares students for manual labor. It is closely followed by the 'Realschule', a middle track focusing on more technical education and is also aimed at service-type occupations. Lastly, the 'Gymnasium' concludes the three-tier system which is the longest school type and gears children towards academics after they graduate (Edelstein, 2013; Nikolai, 2017, p. 114). Our interviewees all teach at schools of this last type.

Universities offer degrees in teaching adapted to each of these three levels of schooling (Nikolai et al., 2017, p. 114) and start off with a first phase of heavy focus on academic training (Waine & Wiborg, 2022, p. 145). A special feature of the German system is that teachers teach more than one subject which is why the university programs for education consist of a major and a minor subject (Waine & Wiborg, 2022, p. 145). While pursuing their studies, students are required to gather practical knowledge in a second phase, where they are delegated to a school and work as trainee teachers (Waine & Wiborg, 2022, pp. 145-147). As soon as students have completed their university degrees in teaching by passing two state exams corresponding to the two phases of their studies, they begin teaching their two subjects and they are granted the status of civil servant with "considerable professional autonomy" (Waine & Wiborg, 2022, p. 146) along with other benefits such as "long holidays, [...] subject specialism, job security and the professional status of teaching" (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 37). Some teachers in Germany are members of teacher unions which gives them an opportunity to exert influence on policy making (Nikolai et al., 2017, pp. 126, 135-136). This is a complex and sometimes lengthy process, due to the fact that the individual federal states have

the ability to decide on their own rules and regulations for education before being considered for national legislative measures (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 19).

Legal Guidelines for School Educators

Teachers are not only involved in politics. In Germany, they are also all subjects to the 'liberal democratic basic order', a key idea in the conception of the country's national and constitutional values, and several other legal guiding principles with regards to their mission to educate 'neutrally' (Thielbörger, n.d.; Wieland, 2019, pp. 1-5). To give this research case a legal framework, we followed Wieland's (2019, pp. 1-2) overview and a took a closer look at the country's 'Civil Service Law' and the 'School Law', the German constitution and the 'Beutelsbach Consensus' (*Beamtenrecht allgemein*, n.d.; Schneider & Toyka-Seid, n.d.). Arising intrinsically from their professional responsibility, the German 'Civil Service Law' is a bill which in paragraph 33 on basic obligations (*Gesetz zur Regelung des Statusrechts…*, n.d.) considers teachers to be representatives and defenders of the state under the 'liberal democratic basic order', who must behave in a non-partisan manner in the classroom, and who must exercise restraint in the case of personal political engagement all for the common good (Wieland, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, the 'School Law', which is a matter of the federal states but is essentially uniform across the nation, focuses above all on peaceful, solidary coexistence in the school community without political influence or advertising as explained in article 2 of the Bavarian legislation (*Bayerisches Gesetz…*, n.d.). Here too, the principle of the 'free and democratic basic order' prevails, the support of equality between men and women is to be encouraged, and schools are supposed to "work towards the elimination of existing disadvantages" (*Bayerisches Gesetz…*, Wieland, 2019, p. 2). On the question of freedom of opinion in classrooms for both teachers and students, the German constitution provides everyone falling under its scope with the "fundamental right to freedom of expression" in article 5 provided their loyalty to it (*Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, n.d.; Wieland, 2019, p. 2). This is, however, also limited by the aforementioned 'Civil Service Law' and 'School Law' with their respective areas of effect (Wieland, 2019, p. 2). The German

constitution also stipulates in article 3 the equal rights of men and women and resembles in its wording the message of the 'School Law' (*Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, n.d.). Lastly, the 'Beutelsbach Consensus', an old guiding principle or "minimal consensus" (*Beutelsbacher Konsens*, 2011) from 1977 that is nationally still in force today, applies to teachers educating on subjects that provide information about politics in Germany (Wieland, 2019, p. 4). In its mission to strengthen democratic values, it consists of a conglomerate of didactic commandments for teachers such as the 'ban on overwhelming' students with their political opinion, the 'controversy rule' by which teachers must address controversial topics as such and the teachers responsibility towards their students of 'empowerment to make judgements' (*Beutelsbacher Konsens*, 2011; Wieland, 2019, p. 4; Wischmann, 2023, pp. 25-26).

To demonstrate a policy where teacher neutrality was strongly debated in the German public discourse, we return to the example we gave in the introduction of our study and shed light on the ban of gender inclusive writing in Bavaria which was enacted as of April 1st 2024 (*Germany's Bavaria cracks down…*, 2024). Aside from potential social repercussions in the school community, teachers who write in a specific gender sensitive way and thus, do not abide by this law can face legal consequences. These have yet to be specified. In general, gender inclusive language in German functions similarly to the French iteration in that the generic masculine is most prevalent in the plural of nouns and in that there are several options of how to use it. We now exemplify this by using the word teacher "Lehrer" which is masculine in the German language. The first way is to add a special character such as a capital "I", so "LehrerInnen", an asterisk: "Lehrer*innen", a colon: "Lehrer:innen" or an underscore: "Lehrer_innen". All of these expressions have been prohibited as opposed to the following two options which have been deemed to be "addressing each gender equally" (*Herrmann…*, 2024). The second option is to double the noun :"Lehrerinnen und Lehrer", and the third is to adapt the noun to a neutral, participial form: "Lehrkräfte" (*Geschlechtergerechte Schreibung…*, 2023). What is important to mention regarding the conversations we had with the research participants is that speakers of the German language

are able to verbally emulate written gender inclusive language by adding a glottal stop between the noun and the gender-indicating suffix.

German Research Participants

In light of these illustrations, we sampled six German teachers and interviewed them between March 28th and April 11th 2024, who work primarily at rural secondary schools on the 'Gymnasium' level and predominantly teach in the southern state of Bavaria (see Appendix 2). Just like on the French side, we selected our panel of interviewees with a variety of gender, age, work experience and subject of teaching in mind. This resulted in a selection of two male and four female teachers from the ages of 27 to 60 who have been teachers for their entire professional lives, are "subject specialists" (Czernawski, 2011, p. 7) in a large sum of disciplines due to the doubling of subjects mentioned above, most strongly represented by the humanities. What aids us in deeply understanding the German case as a local phenomenon is the fact that most of our interview participants graduated from the larger universities in Bavaria such as Munich, Regensburg and Passau and also teach in this same region of the country. This is because the decentralized education system of the federal states complicates having degrees from universities outside of Bavaria recognized and therefore, makes direct entries more difficult (*Quereinstieg*…, 2024). However, due to the principles of the snowball method, we sampled one teacher who works in the state of Baden-Württemberg, a neighboring state of Bavaria in the south of Germany. It turned out that this teacher offered us such an interesting profile through her membership of a teachers' union and her initiative in school activities expressing her personal interest in the topic of gender that we decided to include her in our group of participants.

OVERVIEW OF COMPARABILITY: "THE INTERNATIONAL CHAPTER"

Both France and Germany are home to democratic educational institutions. Even though the two countries have distinctive education systems (Page, 2015, p. 197), they aim for highly similar purposes, which makes them comparable when addressing politics and gender (see Table 3). Throughout French and German history, schools have been powerful stages for governmental views which were gazed upon by an impressionable audience of pupils (Danoff, 2012, p. 117). In France, the state is grounded in republican thought. After the beginning of the 3rd Republic in 1871, French state officials decided that schools were the places to reproduce and maintain this new way of organization to prevent society from slipping away from democratic state structures *(École : les lois Ferry de 1881 et 1882*, n.d.). The German example in schools is more radical, where political indoctrination of the masses through education was present in both extreme right wing and left wing regimes such as the 3rd Reich under national socialist rule or the GDR under the communist government (Christensen & Grammes, 2020, pp. 4, 6). Resulting from this, there is a strong governmental will to build critical thinkers, but framed in a hegemonic culture they should not transgress, which picks up on the dilemma of civic education (Kenner, 2020, p. 127). These conversations transcend abstract concepts and are played out every day by teachers. Currently, the main debate revolves around the gender question, and more specifically the use of inclusive language in both countries, to which we want to direct our critical analysis.

Also, the differentiation between the two cases is allowing potential further development of this research in a more universal frame, broadening it to other countries with which educational ambitions might align. Considering the political perspective we take with our paper, we place importance on the democratic directive regarding gender and other topics the European Union has for the membering states (*EU law*, n.d.), more than on the geographical location of Europe as a whole. This research proposes a framework of study that could be applied to other member states of the European Union in a relatively similar way.

Simultaneously, it would be necessary to anticipate potential differences in educational aspirations, cultural background and legislative contexts within a more global framework. From the beginnings to contemporary politics, France and Germany were and still are significantly involved in the European Union that we know today (Krotz & Schild, 2013, pp. 1, 16) with a major influence in its institutions and with this on the other members, which makes them a suitable sample to address the key concepts of our research.

	France	Germany
School system	Centralised	Stratified
Political system	Democratic Republic	Federal Republic
Judiciary Guidelines	French Constitution Ferry laws Civil Service Laws "School of Trust" Law	Civil Service Law School Law German Constitution The Beutelsbach Consensus
Geographical repartition of the participants	Occitania	Bavaria & Baden-Württemberg
Participants	Fabienne Fred Hortense Mathilde Nathalie Raphael	Axel Charlotte Hannah Marie Sabine Simon

Table 3. Overview of Comparability between France and Germany

ANALYSIS

In this section, we extensively explore the results extracted from our semi-structured interviews with the use of coding processes. Following our reflexive methods, six main categories emerged, each highly connected and intersecting with the others to form a coherent scheme. Following our theoretical observations, here we encounter the previously mentioned key concepts of identities, power and gender through language (see Figure 2). The first section gathers the information given about the perception and interactions of teachers with their surroundings, explaining the fact that teachers are 're-acting' in a dynamic environment. Secondly, we investigate teaching strategies, aiming to uncover the details and procedures of an educational performance. We then turn our focus towards the linguistic question, with the use of gender inclusive language and discussions involving this specific practice in the third section. The fourth category broadens our analytical reflections towards the larger field of politics, encompassing all matters of norms, teacher conformity, and any challenge of hegemony in this regard. The last two chapters both touch on teacher identity, marking our fifth category as an examination of the teachers' performing act in the school context, and the sixth as a shift in perspective, which reframes the topic considering personal attitudes and individualities. This structure reflects our theoretical groundings with the close intersection of our main topics - gender, power, identity, language - across the distinct categories. Starting with more concrete practical matters before moving on to abstractions on a reflexive level, we build a logical progression in the analysis which allows for a nuanced examination of how teachers' various experiences and contemplations ultimately shape their identities. Before delving deeper into the different categories, we choose to start off by offering general observations regarding the interviews in order to present a clearer context and to concretely situate our observations.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Semi-structured interviews give a wide-ranging level of autonomy to the research participants in order to steer the conversation towards topics that are interesting to them, and leaves the field open enough for them to express everything they want to in the way they want to express it. Before dissecting the content of the data which this method provided us with through the transcripts, we examine the general ideas emitted by the interviewees in their discourse, both in form and substance to add a hint of the subtleties to our analysis before delving into the findings from the categories. The primary deduction from our in-depth inspection of the data reveals a congruence between the two cases we compare, leading us towards a purely category-driven storyline, moving our comparative design to the level of the individuals.

The Educational Voice

As a first point in our analysis, we observe a distinctive didactic communication style among the majority of the interviewees, which can be characterized by a sense of authority and expertise, with a very clear and explanatory discourse. They state their opinion with precision and confidence, while making it understandable. Such manners in conveying information and making it comprehensible appear to reflect the performance they deliver as teachers:

> *"I think you have to be convinced and have the desire to convince, whatever the method. [...] and it's part of, how shall I put it, the fruit of a process of reflection"*
>
> Hortense, Biology - France (p. 9)

This persuasiveness is reflected among all the interviews, with a tendency of the research participants to generalize and universalize their perspectives on students, their profession and more universally, on society as the ones who are right. Here, we observe a form of hegemonic conduct, with teachers being in possession of the '*powerful*' and '*legitimate knowledge*' as representatives of the

State (Sabine, p. 5; Schulte, 2018, p. 624; Young, 2009, p. 14). The way we operationalize the methods makes the teachers' perspective central to all conclusions (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 149-150; Mockler, 2011, p. 518), with their voices being the only ones heard here, bringing the need for discussion along the framework of our theory.

Teachers' Ambiguous Conception of Gender

The teachers' comprehension of gender and identity as conceptual ideas carries inherent complexities. This arises in our data in the shape of derivations and tangents made by our interviewees. Indeed, while we start each conversation by asking "What is your opinion on gender?", the majority of them quickly orient the discourse on a more practical representation of it, such as gender inclusive language (Charlotte, Fabienne, Sabine), or, for most, their personal and professional practices and anecdotes (Axel, Fred, Hannah, Hortense, Marie, Mathilde, Nathalie, Raphael, Simon), etc. In light of our observations which emerge from the data, we find that the participants have a very critical perspective on their own potential feminism, despite a broad use of inclusivity in practice and general consensus on the need for equality. The divergence in their definitions and perspectives on feminism illustrates this idea perfectly, showing that talking about concepts does not allow for an effective and accurate analysis on our part, since it refers to varying considerations for each individual. This comes up very explicitly in our data through the differing approach of 'feminism', to which the notion of gender is often limited in political settings due to its simpler comprehensibility. Even though a few of the interviewees attest to their adherence to the feminist movement (Fabienne, p. 15; Marie, p. 5; Mathilde, p. 5; Raphael, p. 12), several of them are more hesitant in defining themselves through this term, sometimes preferring the designation of a "*humanist*" (Hannah, p. 2; Hortense, p. 6; Nathalie, p. 9; Sabine, p. 1). They also mention the ongoing debate on the place of men in such mobilization (Holmgren & Hearn, 2009, pp. 403-404; Jardin & Smith, 2013; Tienari & Taylor, 2019, p. 949), useful for its efficiency (Hortense, p. 6; Raphael, p. 12) but find it questionable in terms of fitting under the 'feminist'

label (Fred, p. 13; Simon, p. 6). This wide range of perspectives on such an abstract concept show the difficulties of grasping it in and of itself, and legitimize an approach through practices. Also, with these teachers as our research participants, we still notice a variety of opinions which can be said to reflect broader societal debates. Since they are individuals with a wider reach due to their professional environment and the number of individuals attending their lessons every day, they, nonetheless, do not define themselves as major activists (Fabienne, p. 15; Hannah, p. 9; Marie, p. 6; Mathilde, p. 5). It is then interesting to investigate how they navigate this influential posture in the classroom and their personal opinion while not overtly advocating for their ideas within the educational sphere and beyond.

In this regard, the structure of our analysis will follow this observed continuity in the data, starting from specific instances and tangible examples and progressively transitioning to broader and more conceptual discussions. This organization allows for a nuanced exploration of gender-related topics as well as a faithful and accurate operationalization of our data set.

POSITIONING THE TEACHERS IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Teachers are situated within a social context which has an impact on their sense making and the ways they interact with their surroundings. Taking a deeper look into the responsive nature of teachers' identities (Sherwood et al., 2021; Caingcoy, 2023), this category sets the scene for the ones to follow and examines our interviewees' perceptions of and relations with their students, colleagues and other significant actors. In this respect, we identified a heavy focus on the bond the teachers share with their students that emerges from our data which will set off our interpretative analysis.

Observations on Gendered Behaviors Amongst Students

Taking in the sum of our data, we detect a strong alignment among our research participants in the way they draw a clear picture of gender specific behaviors and characteristics displayed by their students and demarcate this divergence along binary gender lines:

> *"I think that the performance of boys is expressed differently than that of girls."*
> Charlotte, German/ French - Germany (p. 7)

In the interviews the teachers share their perception of the girls in their classes and explain how they are more fitted to the expectations of the classroom environment and schooling as a whole (Fred, p. 8; Simon, p. 22), paralleling the academic research on this topic (Martino, 2003, p. 287; Renold, 2004, pp. 261-262). This is said by the research participants to show itself in the way they show diligence, meticulousness and precision in carrying out tasks, and how they are perceived as being more caring within the class environment and more inclined to comply with the teachers' instructions (Charlotte, p. 7; Hannah, pp. 7, 14; Sabine, p. 14; Simon, p. 8). By contrast, they set the boys apart and characterize them as being more interested in transgressing school norms in terms of their confidence, levels of participation, ability to focus, speaking time and volume, occupation of

space in the classroom and overall domineering attitudes leading to a level of performativity (Fred, p. 2; Hannah, p. 14; Mathilde, p. 9; Raphael, p. 5; Sabine, p. 14; Simon, p. 22). For these reasons, Fabienne raises the issue that girls are less likely to participate in the class and are "*taught, sometimes rather harshly, not to show themselves*" (p. 3) which further enhances the gendered divide within the class dynamics. We also see such reflections echoed by Raphael who has a similar impression of the students' gendered performances and goes beyond naming these by identifying the underlying places of socialization (Biesta, 2015, p. 19; Saleem et al., 2024, p. 2; Leleux, 2000, p. 276) and the "*intense pressure*" (Simon, p. 5) that his female pupils engage with:

> *"And so I think girls should be able to express themselves more, because I sometimes feel that they are - some of them aren't - but I'd say that often they are, even if they have friends [...] in the classroom, I feel that they're a little closed in on themselves, that they've been unconsciously taught by their parents or by education in general, by teachers, that what they need to be in the classroom is diligent, rigorous. And I think that, well, they do better than the boys according to the statistics on written work or assessments, [...] but they're not as integrated or participative in the classroom. It's rather the boys who, orally, as in the public arena, speak up more, who feel that they have the legitimacy to assert that they're there."*
>
> Raphael, History/ Geography- France (p. 11)

On top of this, Raphael (p. 5) together with Marie (p. 14) and Fabienne (p. 2) creates a small minority for participants who pick up on the difference in vocality but move beyond observations of gender-distinctive division between students and reflect on latent similarities. They recognize that specifically on the levels of talkativeness in the classroom and chatter amongst desk neighbors during their lessons, the girls actually engage in classroom banter just as much as their male peers. What the three teachers note in particular is that the boys seem to disturb their teaching more often and trace this back to the girls' subtlety and lower

speaking volume. Our takeaway from this is that the societal circumstances and expectations the teachers and students have developed in have the ability to distort the teachers' impression of both boys and girls and program their perception of student performance (Charlotte, p. 7; Fabienne, p. 2). Looking across the board of interviews, we gather that teachers agree that there are variations in the potential of distraction during lessons but there is no explicitly mentioned consensus on their interpretation of why they act differently, with one exception. The interviewees notice that school does not suit boys as much as it does girls in terms of performance which has been theorized as a consequence of their socialization to traditional gender roles (Butler, 2002; Carter, 2014, p. 251; DiAngelo, 2016, p. 7; Lorber, 1994, pp. 13, 40).

Similarly, some conversations with the teachers reveal strong attention to the boys' well-being, which they consider being equally important in the debate about diverging societal expectations on students depending on their gender (Fabienne, p. 20; Hortense, p. 6). On this topic, Axel comes from a standpoint of biological traits and sees tiredness, for instance, among his male students as the result of bodily changes in puberty (p. 18). However, there is also Sabine who provides insight into her experiences with girls being tired and "*sluggish*" (p. 13) in her lessons and in this way offsets Axel's perspective of the naturally occurring exhaustion for male students going through puberty by claiming that the same phenomenon is happening to girls. She emphasizes her impression by saying that "*boys [...] don't have that at all*" (p. 13). The dissonance in these observations of the teachers exemplifies how individuals can have a tendency to generalize a behavior they observe in a specific group to a general environment. Here, this is specifically applied to gender groups, essentializing a distinction in motivation by connecting it to a biological event, puberty, however offering an opposite interpretation of it. This leads us to believe that what they detect as a contrast in school performance between students of different genders might not be a natural or biological problem in itself, but a culturally determined reading of it, which fortifies our perspective on gender as socially constructed (Bécares & Priest, 2015, p. 3). Mirroring our analytical findings about the interrelations between the

teachers' preliminary expectations for gendered behavior in the classroom and the way they have a impactful effect on their students (Charlotte, p. 7; Fabienne, p. 2), using their personal judgements as the determinant for their actions come across be supporting pre-existing biases.

What stands out in this regard are the strong stereotypes the teachers express regarding their experiences in how students behave in their classrooms. A large portion even openly admits to the way their views are impacted by gendered clichés (Charlotte, p. 7; Fabienne, p. 2; Hannah p. 14, Sabine, p. 14; Simon, p. 4). We understand these testimonies as an expression of gauged self-awareness about their classroom actions without necessary repercussions. Our prevailing observation shows that classrooms also cannot escape the omnipresence of gendered considerations.

Situating the Students in a Heterogeneous Context

In the classroom scenario, teachers are professionally situated to be standing in front of young people, who are also individuals with their own set of opinions and ideas. Coming from the conclusion that the interviewees notice strong behavioral, gendered differences between students, we now investigate how they perceive them in a broader context.

To begin with, it is crucial to mention that our interviewees share their perspectives on the pupils they interact with in their classrooms, but, as Marie says about her students' comments *"[...] maybe [they] don't mean it or maybe they do. You don't know"* (p. 4) which prevents us from attributing intentions to them. While it is important to acknowledge that students are also meaningful actors in the classroom, we focus here on teachers' experiences over students' perspectives. Therefore, what we seek to uncover in this section is the perception of students by our research participants, which immediately includes a critical dimension because of this interposed gaze. It is also something that teachers are looking for, Hannah says for example that she *"find[s] it exciting to hear what the children have to say"* (p. 2) and Fabienne insists on the idea that *"students' reception"* (p. 4) is central in the teaching experience while also acknowledging that *"that's up*

to them, their thoughts" (p. 4) and it is only possible then to imagine them to a certain extent. Axel recognizes in this regard the importance of addressing topics that students might have *"burning on their minds"* (p. 3).

The unanimous consensus which we retrieved from the data is that there is a change within the recent generations, making the students' existences differ from the teachers' life experiences. Indeed, our interviewees are often comparing the current situation to their own school moments, expressing that things were not the same one or two generations before (Charlotte, p. 6; Fred, p. 5; Mathilde, pp. 4-5; Sabine, p. 7). However, they all express different opinions on who the students are now and how they can be characterized, and do not seem to agree on a common perspective around this evolution in individuals' behaviors. In this regard, they are offering very ambivalent perspectives on the position in which pupils are situating themselves around gender and find it to be *"a topic that is very much on [their] minds [...] at school"* (Charlotte, p. 1), making it important for the teachers' to address in their lessons as well (Axel p. 17; Charlotte, p. 11; Fabienne, p. 16; Hannah, p. 12; Hortense, p. 1; Marie, p. 4; Mathilde, p. 2; Raphael, pp. 1, 15; Simon, p. 12). Firstly, teachers see their students as young people, and therefore as children who are still growing. Perceived as kids, students are considered by our interviewees as individuals who are still learning, and thus making school a place of socialization for them in a conscious way (Fred, pp. 10, 13; Hannah, p. 8; Hortense, pp. 4, 5; Marie, p. 10; Nathalie, p. 16; Sabine, p. 10; Simon, p. 14). Indeed, Simon explains that there is "*a limited horizon of children"* (p. 2) which explains that they do not understand the sexism behind a comment, an idea also supported by Raphael (p. 2). Our research participants show an empathetic perception of their pupils, seeing them as people who "*know very little about politics [and] no longer read the news"* (Hannah, p. 4), and therefore who need to be educated on 'important' matters:

"They don't know what they want. They have no idea about anything. They might just want to be taken by the hand."

Simon, English/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 15)

This way, we understand that there is an influence of the school context on students which offers them new perspectives and an opportunity to build their own thoughts, as well as to detach themselves from the weight of the familial frame (Fabienne, p. 22; Hortense, pp. 4, 5; Marie, p. 7; Simon, p. 3). Through these statements, we observe a lack of awareness from the students, which comes in contrast to the amount of knowledge and legitimate culture the teachers have (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Young, 2009).

This dichotomy reinforces the aptitude of teachers to see this limitation in the children and teenagers in front of them. In the professional context however, they are carrying a hegemonic understanding of "good knowledge", and thus are more likely to focus on the fields they have expertise in. From this, we see that the difference in acquired knowledge is an issue of quality in terms of subjects mastered rather than quantity regarding their overall volume of knowledge. By recalling the observations made previously about teachers' perspectives on gender, we get to know that "*young people understand much, much better"* (Mathilde, p. 7) what kind of modern social questions arise out of this current debate. This opinion is widely shared in our data, with our interviewees expliciting that students now define themselves as feminists and have a higher level of information and awareness (Marie, p. 2; Mathilde, p. 5; Nathalie, p. 17; Sabine, p. 4). Overall, students display a better level of understanding and respect towards the question of gender (Simon, p. 20):

"This is already the next generation and they are much more aware of this topic than we were, my generation was. And they actually use 'gendering' in a very natural way."

Sabine, English/ Physical Education - Germany (p. 4)

However, one of the limitations raised by a few of our research participants is the outlook from students on this matter, with Charlotte sharing her impression that young women consider feminism and women's rights "*a done deal*" (p. 11), or Nathalie recalling an event during which *"the boys would say to [their teachers],*

"Yeah, there's that theme again, I'm fed up with it, we talk about it all the time!"" (p. 8). This ambivalence in the pupils' reactions is one of the reasons leading teachers to address it, as they are all considering the questions of equality and tolerance fundamental in the education of children.

On this topic, since the students are situated in a specific environment and due to their young age, they are very malleable to external influences (Harter, 2015, p. 322). Consequently, this statement shapes the reactions the educators offer to the events occurring in the classroom, as well as their own performances. They have to work with what is there, the beliefs and attitudes children have without creating loyalty conflicts (Thin, 1998, p. 171; Renold, 2004, pp. 260-261), and replacing the results of a previous socialization (Hortense, p. 5). This process manifests itself mostly through the considerations from teachers about the distinctive schools they work at, acknowledging that these are reflecting a larger social situation because of its geographical implantation and the audience it brings together (Axel, p. 12; Charlotte, p. 8; Fabienne, p. 8; Hannah, pp. 1, 3; Hortense, pp. 3, 12; Mathilde, pp. 6-7; Simon, p. 3). Hortense recalls an experience she had with students reflecting on this mix of outsider influences in the behaviors in the classroom, and the importance of understanding each other's perspectives:

"There was a group of pupils of North African origin who arrived late at the same time. I pointed to them in the group, in fact, I said "they", saying "they're going to stand at the back". And in fact I think they're used to the malevolent look towards their community and they're conditioned by it. And in fact, behind this "they" there's a pupil who understood the Arabs, which I didn't mean at all, but you see my word carried weight and in fact, he said to me "What do you mean, 'they'?" in a very vehement way. And I looked at him like that, astonished because I didn't understand what he meant. In fact, I said "the boys" and then he said to me "Oh well, all right". Because, well, he was conditioned, he thought that behind this "they" were the Arabs [...] And he says, "Mrs., when we go to city A or whatever, we're always labeled the Arabs of city B, the Arabs of

city B".[8] *So that was the first thing. It made me aware of their reality, because I wasn't aware of it myself."*

Hortense, Biology - France (pp. 14-15)

It is essential to address these issues because students are differentially affected and shaped through their own individual life experiences that teachers are not immediately familiar with, as Hortense explicates (p. 15). While we discuss students and teachers as collective entities through this paper, it is imperative to understand that they are all distinct individuals, requiring a nuanced approach. The convergence of these multiple and diverse experiences creates a complex environment for teachers to act in, offering both opportunities and challenges in their pedagogical practices. The essence of teaching therefore lies in the search for such a balance, to "*get to know the pupil as an individual"* (Fabienne, p. 5) while not leaving anyone behind (Raphael, p. 3).

Finally, students are also the embodiment of the renewal of society and embrace its new challenges and ideals, representing the change in considerations with the new generations compared to the ones of their teachers. In this regard, we can reflect on the nature itself of such interactions in the classroom, bringing people together who belong to different strata of the social world and with this creating extraordinary conversations. At the same time, the introduction of external factors into a supervised environment complexifies the power struggles occurring there.

Navigating Influences from Outside the Classroom

Apart from their students, our interviewees relay that they engage with three main external factors as part of their professional environment which also have an impact on them (Goffman, 1959; Makovec, 2018, p. 33). In their everyday work life at school for instance, the teachers encounter and interact with various staff

[8] For ethical reasons and protection of the anonymity of our participants, we decided not to disclose the locations of their schools.

such as other teachers and school management among others. Regarding these coworkers, the teachers most noticeably comment on the hierarchies, their own positioning within them and the way their reputation plays a role in the way these are constructed (Charlotte, p. 11; Fred, p. 12; Hannah, p. 15). This, as they call it, social "*standing*" (Charlotte, p. 13; Hannah, p. 16) is individual to the standpoints of the teachers, but we nevertheless identified two main streams with the same outcome. To some, their reputation is especially important to build early on in their career (Hannah, p. 15; Raphael, pp. 6-7) due to their inclination to assert themselves among their more experienced colleagues, but once they have established themselves, they stop giving it any significant attention for different reasons (Fabienne, p. 9; Fred, p. 12, Marie, p. 15). We can therefore identify a common attitude of indifference towards their own reputation among the school board and more of a collaborative understanding of being part of a team in the interest of the students. The concrete instances where they claim to consult with their colleagues is for example when they seek reassurance or want to come to a consensus about issues like students' behaviors and course content (Axel, p. 9; Fabienne, p. 5; Hannah p. 10). An example of this would be the way Hannah (p. 13), Hortense (pp. 3, 5), Mathilde (p. 7), Nathalie (pp. 14-15) and Simon (pp. 18-19) recount about the way the teaching staff at their schools handle new situations such as the coming out of a transgender student in a consolidated way. This combination of individually streamlined work practices and the selectiveness in cooperation bring us to understand that the educators prioritize such exchanges for activities of consciously chosen collaborations (Nathalie, pp. 11-12).

Occasionally, teachers also come in contact with their students' parents through teacher-parent meetings, for example, where they talk about their students' performance in class. Similarly to their student-minded relationships with their colleagues at school, teachers like Sabine (p. 19) and Simon (p. 18) feel more obligated to the students they are faced with on a day to day basis rather than their legal guardians who, in hers and others experience, oftentimes have certain expectations and prejudices towards educators due to their already settled belief systems (Fred, p. 12; Hortense, p. 3; Marie, p. 9; Mathilde, p. 8). Although

our interviewees explain that they are open to having a conversation with them about their teaching practices, they are not willing to discuss or change them following their demands (Nathalie, pp. 12, 13; Raphael, pp. 6, 7; Sabine, p. 19). Our research participant Nathalie, for instance, mentions being confronted with parents who didn't want their son to take part in a stereotypically female sport, stating her impression that "*it bothered the parents more than the child*" (p. 13). Simon extends this perspective by saying that parents have virtually no say over the teacher (p. 18). We recognize that for Hortense (pp. 4, 5) and Raphael (pp. 6, 7), however, this position of power has its limits where the teachers encounter conflicting belief systems between their professional practices and the views of their students' families. Here, students find themselves in a double bind (Thin, 1998, p. 171) between the emotional connection to their families and the legitimacy given to the knowledge teachers disseminate (Fabienne, p. 22; Hortense, pp. 4, 5; Marie, p. 7).

These two impactful entities in the student's lives converge with a third one which exceeds their interpersonal sphere and elevates it to an even broader social range. A significant number of interviewees brought up the topic of social media of their own accord and problematize it as a force external to the school context with a significant influence on their students as well (Axel, p. 6; Fabienne, pp. 8, 9; Fred, p. 5; Hannah, p. 4; Hortense, p. 15; Raphael, pp. 12-13; Sabine, p. 19; Simon, p. 3). Mostly concerned with the verbal violence and purposefully ambiguous information in this sphere (Axel, p. 6; Fabienne, p. 8; Hortense, p. 15), these interviewees raise their objections along the lines of the following view:

"In other words, it's something we insist on a lot, and it's not just me in fact, it's us teachers, about the sources. In other words, look at where the information you have access to comes from, because we know very well that they have lots and lots and lots of access to information through social media and that sort of thing. [...] Where does the information you use actually come from?"

Fred, History/ Geography - France (p. 5)

They see the rise of these digital networks with the information they provide as a form of education away from school or the parents (Raphael, p. 12) which plays on the students' unstable and still-developing value systems (Fabienne, p. 9). The teachers' doubts about social media cause us to believe that they feel like they are losing their impact on the students as a trustworthy source for evidence-based civic education (Axel, p. 6; Fred, p. 5; Gomendio, 2023, pp. 19-20) as they enter a competition with an increasingly abundant source of information always validating and never questioning.

Jointly, our research participants acknowledge that these actors external to their own classrooms exist and have an influence on them as teachers. Yet in the end, the interviewees recognize their own agency in their lessons, but also understand that it is limited by these outside entities.

Engaging in a Unique Relationship

Taking a turn from the mostly observational point of view to a more participating one, we find that teachers stand in more of a reactive than an active relationship with their students which centered around the feedback they sense from them (Fabienne, p. 9; Hortense, p. 8; Mathilde, p. 4; Nathalie, p. 3; Raphael, pp. 5, 15; Simon, p. 18). To start with, however, the teachers have to build said relationships first and, as they disclose to us, balance between professional utilitarian obligations and personal involvement making time a deciding factor in getting to know each other (Fabienne, p. 5; Fred, p. 3; Hannah, p. 6; Bainbridge Frymier & Houser, 2009, p. 208). Gradually, the scales start tipping and leaning more towards the personal side, because the teachers start learning about their pupils and adapting their teaching to the observations they make about them in order to engage them more during their lessons (Fred, p. 9; Hortense, p. 8; Mathilde, p. 4; Nathalie, p. 3; Raphael, pp. 5, 15). Fabienne reveals what this development of the connection with her pupils looks like for her:

"It's after several months, after 5-6 months, when I know the student as a person, that I'll ask him for news or I'll ask his father or mother when I'll meet

them news of the older child, that's it. But to consider a student in relation to his sister is so unfair. I mean, it's really unfair. And no, what's at stake is creating a relationship with a human being, so whether it's a boy or a girl, it's all the same."

Fabienne, French - France (p. 6)

This amalgamation of public and private disclosure in the classroom combined with the power related matters of educational and generational advantage on the teachers' end is what makes this relationship unlike any other (Strandbrink, 2017, p. 36). These power dynamics become even more complex since we pick up on a certain parental note our interviewees apply when talking about their students as 'children' (Fred, pp. 10, 13; Hannah, p. 8; Hortense, pp. 4, 5; Marie, p. 10; Nathalie, p. 16; Sabine, p. 10; Simon, p. 14). Accompanied by statements on this point by Fabienne (pp. 1-2, 7), Nathalie (p. 10) and Sabine (p. 13) about the parallels they see in their educational care work at home with their kids and at school with their students, our data invites us to consider a level of comparability between these two roles. The teachers align with parents in their will to guide children and make them enlightened people (Beutel, 2012, p. 8; Isac et al., 2011, p. 315; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 35), coming back to the tradition of the pedagogue reproducing societal structures (Fabienne, p. 18; Nathalie, p. 8; Raphael, p. 3; Biesta, 2015, p. 19; *Pedagogy*, n.d.; Saleem et al., 2024, p. 2). Similarly tying this back to the origins of the teaching profession in ancient Greece, Hannah explains how she calls her students from their beginnings in secondary school all the way to when they graduate 'children':

"I realize that I have adopted the wording of a very, very old colleague [...] who was in Greece for a long time as an exchange teacher and who said: "In Greece, all pupils are always children."

Hannah, German/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 8)

This parental stance is, at the same time, given some ambiguity by certain age-dependent expectations on the part of the teacher. On the one hand, the

interviewees talk about their students as children who have to be mentored, but on the other, they regard them as adults in the making with future responsibilities (Mathilde, p. 3; Nathalie, p. 8; Raphael, p. 3) which is especially apparent when they talk about the higher grades. The tension created by these intertwined roles forces teachers to adapt to their students with regards to their age, which is why their differentiated practices originate then in their perception of what is at stake for the future. Balancing these influences in their teaching performance is necessary considering their aim to facilitate the development of aspiring citizens through classroom interactions.

When talking about the affective aspect of the relationship to their students, our interviewees generally have a positive image of it (Charlotte, p. 5; Fabienne, p. 6; Hannah, p. 6; Hortense, pp. 14, 15; Marie, p. 10). This can be traced back to the dominant position they have in the classroom, where the students are less likely to utter their critical opinion (Hannah, p. 4; Hortense, p. 2). The teachers' supposed observant role, in the way they adapt their practices to how they perceive their students' responses, becomes obscured by their own understanding of the situation (Sabine, p. 8). With their measure of success in teaching by the criteria of good reactions from their pupils, they validate their own practices (Charlotte, p. 5; Fabienne, p. 6; Fred, p. 12; Hortense, p. 10; Marie, pp. 8, 10; Sabine, p. 10; Simon, pp. 15, 16). They are also aware that the students behave differently in their presence where they have the tendency to be more serious and, according to Raphael, "*self-regulate*" (p. 9), than they do in their absence where they might act out towards each other more (Fabienne, p. 16; Hortense, p. 10; Marie, p. 3; Sabine, p. 18; Brady, 2022, p. 105). What we extract from this is that the conscious recognition of power on both sides of the classroom spectrum elaborates on the unique, hierarchical relationship between them.

Coming back to teachers' situatedness in a power school environment, we observe in conclusion to this chapter on the category of 'Positioning the Teachers in their Professional Environment' that teachers are more reacting in how they perceive their students which is already not neutral, than acting with no regard to their

environment, aligning with our interactionist perspective. In their discursive presentations of their experiences, the students are central to our interviewees' teaching, giving them more consideration than any other social entity they engage with in their profession.

BEING A TEACHER MEANS TEACHING IN PRACTICE

Closely linked to the teachers' observational and adaptive approach when teaching lies the question of how and why they implement certain teaching practices and techniques. From their discourse about their didactic strategies, we identify a major impact of minute tendencies instead of visionary concepts. The combined findings of the following section marks them as the second category of our analytical findings.

Strategies in Class Management

The general rule of thumb among the teachers seems to be the 'humanist' view where they explain that they, in fact, do not treat their students differently with respect to their gender, but put the individual above all else (Axel, p. 8; Fabienne, p. 5; Hannah, p. 6; Marie, p. 14). Here, they lay a heavy emphasis on tolerance and equality as the foundation for this standpoint (Axel, pp. 5, 21; Fabienne, p. 13).

In recollection of the gendered behaviors teachers take notice of when perceiving their students however, we identify a distinction among the educators in how they approach them. Frome one angle, both Fred (pp. 1-2) and Raphael (p. 11) share that they have to be more physically assertive in posture and voice in order to keep the boys in check. Even though they claim having impartial practices with regards to gender, this means in turn that girls who sit in the same classroom are subjected to these same practices catered towards boys:

> *"[...] deliberately, maybe I'm wrong, but deliberately I consider all the students like I consider the boys."*
>
> Fabienne, French - France (p. 3)

Managing the students as a whole goes beyond mechanisms of physically establishing the role of the teacher. The aforementioned binary divide in the student dynamics can be traced to the manner in which teachers point out the seating order. On this topic, Sabine mentions how in her classroom she finds the

boys sitting in the back rows whereas the girls tend to be seated more towards the front, creating a partition between the students which she only rearranges for more effective teaching purposes (p. 14). According to some, it has a lot to do with how the students perform in class (Charlotte, p. 7; Sabine, p. 14). When they decide to encroach on the seating, they propose changing it for disciplinary purposes but they only consider it to be a regulatory measure when it is in fact gendered. Analogous to the seating order within the classroom, when teachers have group scenarios play out in front of them, they moderate them and intervene in line with their 'humanist' perspective (Hannah, p. 6). They report this to be happening mostly when students choose by themselves who they want to work with (Hannah, p. 14; Marie, p. 10; Nathalie, pp. 2-3; Sabine, p. 13). We find that the teachers describe themselves as mindful of a gender-mixed group since they do not consider the group constellations in which boys and girls are separated as productive in terms of fulfilling tasks (Hannah, p. 13; Marie, pp. 10-11), but also in regards to the preparation for life after school where they will also have to collaborate with people they usually would not work with (Marie, p. 10-11; Nathalie, p. 3; Raphael, p. 5). Countering their self-proclaimed humanist view, they give importance to the gender dimension of their students' identities by basing their own practices on it. This discrepancy between the theory and the practice testifies of the permanent and subliminal presence of gender. This reflects the central importance of gender in social interactions (Lorber, 1994, p. 13; Ivinson & Murphy, 2007, p. 6), as it is the criteria they choose to determine how to work with people by, at the same time nurturing a tolerant and inclusive atmosphere in the classroom.

The preceding observations surrounding the alignment of the classroom management with the teachers' pedagogical preferences raise the question of what happens when students act out of these lines drawn by their educators and how the latter interfere. Teachers recognize that it does not happen often because of the unique relationship that they have with their students (Fabienne, p. 16; Raphael, p. 9). Those who can recall or imagine cases of spontaneous sexist, misogynous or other discriminatory remarks in their classroom between the students or towards the teacher themselves unanimously stated that they would

engage in practices of intervention (Hannah, p. 10; Marie, pp. 4, 5; Raphael, p. 2; Simon, p. 4). Instances of discrimination and sexism are what makes gender apparent to some because of the transgression it shows (Lorber, 1994, p. 14). Here, the teachers fall back on what Hannah calls a "*repertoire*" (p. 10) of methods to intersect this action. A typical sequence of events would be that the teacher reacts to a discriminatory comment in front of the class with verbal confrontation and asks the student, always thought of as a boy, to explain himself (Axel, p. 12; Fabienne, p. 8; Nathalie, pp. 5-6; Simon, p. 4). After the lesson has ended, the teachers would seek a conversation with the student responsible for the transgression away from the class (Charlotte, p. 8; Hortense, p. 4). As far as further actions in the case of repeatedly occurring incidents, several interviewees, such as Fred (p. 13), Hortense (p. 5) and Marie (p. 5), propose to contact their school's social worker to take over the case. There is a relocation of agency from the teachers to external actors, seeking assistance when it exceeds their area of competence. At the same time, Simon (p. 4) and Fabienne (p. 6) voiced concerns about excessively humiliating the students and wanting to restore their previous relationship with the students, since it will not create lasting change within the person and that they are conscious of the necessity to live by what they teach about tolerance. Broadly speaking and following the same pattern, if the teachers were to turn a blind eye to the discriminatory behavior of their students and not react, they would not be expressing neutrality but would position themselves, nevertheless (Fabienne, p. 9; Apple, 2013, pp. 24; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Strategies in Delivering Subject Specific Content

Aside from the interpersonal aspect of teaching, the interviewees see these practices of classroom management as setting the scene for the knowledge delivery they perform as well. Teachers get their messages across in a way that is specific to the content of their course as specified by the curriculum. When teaching, the interviewees resort to methods for personalizing the course material according to their perception of the students in order to make it more interesting and thus, memorable and digestible for their students (Axel, p. 3; Fabienne, p. 7; Fred, p. 3;

Marie, p. 10; Mathilde, p. 4; Raphael, p. 6; Simon, p. 7). They also attempt to innovate their teaching by adding more interactive elements such as games during their lessons (Axel, p. 19; Fred, p. 4; Marie, p. 4; Simon, pp. 9, 10). Despite the varying course orientation regarding gender due to differing disciplines, the interviewees' approaches correspond with their effort towards equality. Whether it is the balancing of the male-dominated proposals for literature in the curriculum (Charlotte, p. 11; Fabienne, p. 16; Hannah, p. 12; Mathilde, p. 13; Simon, p. 12) or the student focused promotion of activities countering gender stereotypes (Axel, p. 19; Marie, p. 4), the teachers report to be harmonizing the content of their lesson with the democratic values they want to promote. The emphasis on this topic in the data shows that it is a conscious doing of the teachers to go beyond the mere reproduction of installed norms (Raphael, p. 9; Simon, p. 8), updating the legitimate knowledge they transmit with modern debates:

> *"And nowadays I take two boys - or rather I first ask who has abs and would sacrifice themselves for a moment. And then I demonstrate the difference between: "Berti stands on/fancies Toni", in that sense, and [say]: "Go stand on his stomach"[9]. Simply that it has been brought up. Well, I don't make a big fuss about it, but my hetero examples are sometimes perhaps homo examples."*
>
> Marie, German/ English - Germany (p. 4)

The interviewees are aware of the curriculum and sometimes implement multimodal teaching, but this is not the only way in which gender inclusivity is achieved in the classroom (Hannah, p. 4). Equality also presents itself in the manner of linguistic communication through the use of inclusive language, but on this topic the research participants reveal diverging approaches. We choose to explore it as the third category of our analysis since it was a major talking point

[9] In German, the verb "stehen" is used in two grammatically congruent ways, one meaning "to stand" and the other, in certain contexts, "to fancy".

in the interviews and because of how we view language at the center of every social interaction (Cameron, 2012, p. 2; Talja et al., 2005, p. 89).

EXPLORING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE PRACTICES IN THE CLASSROOM

The use of language is the fundamental practice overarching the ways of shaping social interactions in teaching. Taking into account that all of our interviewees are situated in environments where they communicate through gendered languages, the exploration of this category provides a closer look at the specific one of inclusive language and its use in the classroom. It first addresses its frequency of utilization, before delving into the reasoning behind it through the matter of practicability and the importance of such debate in the education field and society.

Ambivalent Utilization

From the conversations with the teachers we gather that the utilization of inclusive language in the classroom context differs among educators, and its frequency is very variable. All of our interviewees are not new to the concept of gender inclusivity in language and were able to offer an answer about whether they have inclusive practices or not. However, the tension appears in their position regarding it. To state some examples for this contrast, Hannah (p. 7) and Fabienne (p. 11) share that they don't utilize gender inclusive language, whereas Hortense (p. 11) and Simon (p. 16) assert that they make a point in speaking in this manner. From their explanations, we note that the research participants all seem to have developed an opinion on this matter and are able to offer an immediate answer. We trace this back to both the omnipresence of gender in modern societies (Lorber, 1994, p. 13) and the extent to which this question has had to be addressed in schools and institutions, as our interviewee Fred (p. 8) mentions. However, upon closer inspection and despite this apparent dichotomy in opinions, there seems to be a shared ambivalence in practices of gender inclusive language and not as much of a strict adherence to the teachers' initial positioning statements. We find that the majority of teachers relate to the ideas expressed below by Marie and Raphael who indicate that they are making use of gender inclusive selectively, depending on the setting they are situated in:

"Otherwise I try to use gender inclusive language when I think about it."

Marie, German/ English - Germany (p. 11)

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"Orally, I say "now you can work with your (male or female) neighbor", but in writing, no, I don't do that."

Raphael, History/ Geography - France (p. 9)

As indicated by the citations, the shift from a straight divide to a more complex blend in the teachers' perspectives on gender inclusive language invites us to reflect on the practical ways their personal ideals end up being applied. This is best illustrated by Fabienne, who specifies that when she asks the students "*a question that involves them, a creative writing question for example, there [she] put[s] the 2 forms, the masculine and the feminine*" (p. 11) although simultaneously stating explicitly that she does not use gender inclusive writing. Therefore, we come to observe a certain level of discrepancy between what is said and what is done, or in other words in their definition of inclusive language at an individual level and how they execute it. In a similar way to what Fabienne utters in her quote, the research participants implicitly or explicitly consider inclusive language as the use of the midpoint in French ("·") or the colon in German (":"), but particularly often excluding the use of the double nominative of this set of language rules and thus, integrating it into their own 'traditional' language practices. In this way, the debate moves from the overall appearance of inclusive writing in the teachers' lessons and school life to its frequency and consistency in daily use. As an example, Hortense detailed her habits to feminize the vocabulary she uses, and to pay attention to the gendered aspect in her texts and speeches before asserting that it is not inclusive language, which differs from the theoretical definition we use (UN Women, n.d.):

"*Whenever I can feminize, put adjectives in the feminine, I do it. So it's not inclusive writing with the little middle point and so on."*

Hortense, Biology - France (p. 11)

In the cases where the interviewees express aesthetic or practical objections to using inclusive language (Axel, pp. 2, 8; Fabienne, p. 11; Fred, pp. 6, 7; Hannah, pp. 8, 9; Sabine, p. 2), we infer that the dissent appears to be focused towards opposing the system itself, or the concept of gender inclusive language with special characters, more than the actual idea of including both genders in language. Going back to the individual profiles of our interviewees, we can identify that the ones most advanced in their careers, and particularly men (Axel, Fred) are the ones expressing a stronger resistance to such practice, at least in their openly shared opinions - but not necessarily in their practices, just like the case of Fabienne mentioned earlier (p. 11). This can be seen as an indicator of larger social dynamics, in which they both are positioned in a more dominant position within societal hierarchies. On the other hand, Marie recognizes that her interest in such themes are probably linked to a feminine identity, and acknowledges that she is less involved in racial matters due to her privileged position as a white person (p. 3). In this regard, the patterns we identified correspond with the idea that individuals in power are less likely to embrace progressive practices in which they challenge the hegemony in place. This encourages us to question the reasoning behind the resistance to change, or the conformity to the existing norms which we explore in the category hereafter.

Questioning Practicability

When discussing their use of inclusive language and writing in their professional occupations, our interviewees point out the dimension of practicability as the main determinant and doubt about such linguistic practices. Here, we identified a general consensus among the teachers about the difficulties of implementation and struggles to manipulate this inclusive form of language in order to suit the classroom situations, which to them results in a challenge of utilization on a regular basis:

"The only factor that actually plays a role sometimes is practicability, in the matter of fact, yes. How do I find a way to make the whole thing practicable without it becoming too cumbersome and complicated?"

Charlotte, German/ French - Germany (p. 2)

This educator underlines the internal battle she goes through as an individual when using inclusive language. Even when changing the perspective of the teacher from being the enactor of inclusive language practices to being the person on the perceiving end, the same issue remains and seems to be discouraging them in their practices:

"*Oh no, no, really, because I'm telling you, as a reader, I find it too tiring in fact."*

Fred, History/ Geography - France (p. 7)

This more receptive position Fred took can generally be connected with the teachers' perceptions of their students who they direct their messages towards, and lines up with our findings on the influence pupils have on their educators' classroom practices. From our data we were able to extract that some teachers raise skepticism about gender inclusive language with their classes. Hortense, for instance, expresses concerns about the development of her students' abilities regarding reading comprehension when using special characters in her writing and therefore, turns to more conventional expressions (p. 11). In a similar way, Fabienne does not consider bringing up the topic of inclusive language in the classroom since she notices the lack of grammatical competences in the writings of her students as limiting their ability to understand and apply the complexity of gender inclusive language in their own papers (p. 12). In her classroom, Sabine also employs the strategy of simplification for the sake of eliminating confusion among her young audience (p. 4). This situated practice is exemplifying how teachers aim to give instruments to students to later develop their own sets of practices, prioritizing the hegemonic standards as a basis on which to build upon and potentially to contest them. We are able to come to the understanding that

teachers not only take their own preferences into account, but also regard their students' experiences as key factors in the ways they choose to embrace or disregard aspects of inclusive language practices. In this sense, they prefer to use traditionally standardized grammar over explorative wording showing a distinction between 'accepted inclusivity' and what could be called 'overbearing inclusivity' (Fred, p. 6). This disparity in the practices also reflects the political comprehension of inclusive writing in both countries, with bans of certain forms of it but not others (*Innenminister Joachim Herrmann…*, 2023; *Règles De Féminisation…,* n.d.). In response to these policies and personal debates, some of our interviewees are finding solutions and answers to these types of challenges, using a generic feminine (Simon, p. 16) or alternatively using both genders to refer to a mixed group (Fabienne, p. 11; Raphael, p. 10). Overall, the teachers are predominantly demonstrating adaptive practices in their use of modern and innovative languages, combining their personal conceptions and a general approval of gender inclusive language. Here we can clearly discern that practices and individual choices are what is shaping language and its use, rather than overarching directives or decisions from authority figures, as Fabienne strongly insists on (p. 14).

Language in the Larger Context of Society

The conversation surrounding gender inclusive language holds a significant position in our data set, with all interviewees expressing their thoughts about it. Unanimously, they observe this shift towards more inclusivity in language as something which is generally occurring, cannot be avoided and that they also see echoed in educational contexts:

"I think language is developing and it is perhaps a language development that is currently in progress."

Charlotte, German/ French - Germany (p. 2)

With this answer, Charlotte, among others (Axel, p. 17; Fabienne, p. 11; Marie, p. 12; Simon, p. 17), acknowledges the evolving nature of language over time. Applying this to the bigger picture of gender equality, the teachers' responses all disclose a certain use of inclusive writing, with varying degrees of awareness and commitment and give their opinions on its importance in current debates in a polarized way. Two strong and opposing perspectives stood out to us, with the advocates of a societal change through language on one side (Hortense, p. 11; Marie, p. 12; Mathilde, p. 6; Nathalie, p. 4; Raphael, p. 1; Simon, p. 17), and the ones considering that it is a superfluous fight on the other (Axel, p. 3; Fabienne, p. 13; Fred, p. 7; Hannah, p. 2; Sabine, p. 4), as in the two following examples:

"I don't think the fight for equality goes through that. I don't think it's a priority."

Fred, History/ Geography - France (p. 7)

-

"I think that language is also very important for making women visible, et cetera."

Mathilde, Social Sciences - France (p. 11)

These two perspectives apply to all of our interviewees across nations, and can be regarded as a reflection of the larger perception this question has in society. On a personal level, the advocacy for the use of inclusive writing finds its origins in the deeper understanding of their identity and self-determination by the individuals, who, for some, establish and maintain their identity through interactions with others, and thus a form of performance (Goffman, 1959), while others are completely resistant to it. From there, choices of language are becoming impactful on the level of identity (Fabienne, p. 12; Mathilde, p. 6; Sabine, p. 4). On a larger scale, the implementation of inclusive writing is very polarized, facing challenges and questions regarding its efficiency and relevance in reaching equality (Bigler & Leaper, 2015, pp. 187, 189; Parkison, 2013, p. 23; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009, p. 641). The opposing perspectives we uncover in our data set are encapsulating

the diversity in attitudes within society and our panel, and mirror the larger debate surrounding language as an agent of social change.

Exploring inclusive language practices in the classroom reveals a strong interplay of personal choices, opinions and practical considerations. We discover that while it can seem very divided at first sight, there is a need for a deeper examination to uncover the challenges and stakes of a diverse use of language against the backdrop of official norms. We can conclude here, however, that there is a consensus of tolerance and inclusivity among our interviewees, which is manifested through their use of language. Despite variations in how they define and align with feminist ideas (see General observations) and their criticism of the principle of gender inclusive language, the teachers' commitment to inclusivity in their use of language and other practices illustrates their underlying dedication to fostering equality and respect within the educational environments.

EXERCISING AGENCY AS A TEACHER AND CIVIL SERVANT

After having deconstructed various classroom practices and strategies that are employed by teachers in France and Germany, we are now interested in how these are subjected to a legal framework. In this section of our analysis, we investigate how teachers comply with culturally hegemonic guidelines, how they challenge them or sometimes even find themselves in a balancing act.

Balancing Legislation and Individuality

If teachers are the main actors of authority in their classrooms, they are also at the intersection of several other power relations in which they might have to comply with norms and legislation. Throughout our data, we can identify two sets of rules having an impact on teachers: the curricula and the law. They both have a direct impact on their practices, and we explore here to what extent they align with them on a regular basis. At school level, teachers identify a framework as guidelines to orient their practices and direct them towards what they "have to" do. These suggestions apply both in terms of content and behaviors towards their pupils. Axel for example remarks that the topics they should mention in class are not the result of their own decisions, but implemented from above, also mentioned by Hannah (p. 12) who explains that she has to find her way between what the curriculum imposes on her in terms of knowledge to transfer to her students and the ideas she would like to give them, for example with using more balanced gender examples:

> *"We have a curriculum that specifies which topics we have to cover."*
>
> Axel, Biology/ Chemistry - Germany (p. 18)

Similarly, Hortense explains it would be helpful that the school and hierarchy guidance would know how to behave in front of students, in the example of a transgender child in her case:

"I don't have the answers, because I also need my superiors to know what we're doing, how far along this student is in their reflection, how the parents are going to react. So there you have it."

Hortense, Biology - France (p. 3)

Here, more than restricting legislation, the curriculum and procedure rules are utilized as a roadmap for teachers to start from to implement and organize their educational practices. On the other hand, and since they are civil servants, they are also subjected to the law (Nathalie, p. 16). From our interviewees, we understand that the principles enunciated there act primarily as constraints and limitations, a framework within which they must remain (Hortense, pp. 3-4) because of its official aspect and the potential legal consequences they would face (Hannah, p. 9; Marie, p. 7):

"I can't ignore it in such situations if it's official"

Charlotte, German/ French - Germany (p. 3)

While the majority insist on the framework they are given by the law, it is mostly about acknowledging it and not ignoring it for the teachers. Nathalie also explains that the law might be a justification for her to act in a situation during which she might not have her own opinion. She explains how when she would not know how to act in front of a specific situation, here the choice of changing rooms for a transgender or non-binary student, she would use the law as directing her answer, explaining further that this solution is also a justification for her to explain her reaction to students and parents later (p. 15). The interesting thing to note in this quote is that she first mobilizes her own opinion, and because of her uncertainty, or absence of thoughtful opinion on this matter, she turns towards the legislative framework as an external actor of agency:

"I don't know, it's really - I think I'd rely on the law"

Nathalie, Physical Education - France (p. 15)

This framework also offers teachers a space to exercise their autonomy to a certain extent. Raphael (p. 8) explains specifically that, if he has to rely on the law and the official texts, he can from there expose divergent opinions (p. 8). However, he also recognizes that he is not fully aware of certain aspects of legislation on gender inclusive language for example (p. 10). From our set of interviewees, we can see that there is a strong tendency towards a personalization of the practices they perform, even if it is founded on a common basis:

"So I think we all read the curriculum as it suits us."
Mathilde, Social Sciences - France (p. 8)

Mathilde's statement here reflects the self-determination teachers implement in their classrooms and the balance teachers have to navigate between conformity and autonomy. If the curriculum dictates specific knowledge to be transmitted (Apple, 2013, p. 23; Au, 2023, p. 13; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Young, 2009, p. 13), teachers strive to include their personal touches and values in it, for example explaining that language is "*macho*" for Fabienne (p. 13) meaning sexist, or putting special attention on a diverse choice of examples and illustrations (Hortense, p. 7; Marie, p. 4). Despite the constraints they are subjected to, there is a strong sense of agency taken and acted upon by teachers in shaping their classroom practices in their own direction. Similarly to what happens regarding gender inclusive language, several participants mention practical aspects directing their choices towards a greater compliance than they would choose if they had a larger scope of independent action. Time and performance goals are the two main arguments mainly influencing teachers towards a closer following of the curriculum and legislation, rather than their actual content (Mathilde, p. 8). This is best illustrated by Marie, clearly stating that:

"If I had more time to just blather on, regardless of what I'm supposed to be teaching, then I would probably be much more unfiltered."
Marie, German/ English - Germany (p. 7)

Conclusively on this matter, one can see that teachers are surrounded by guidelines, frameworks and rules surrounding their practices. However, we can very clearly discern that the willingness to follow and comply with them is the result of a conscious decision rather than an imposed mandate, testifying of their variable positioning of agency, and showing that individuality is largely reflected in the classroom.

Challenging Hegemony in a Confined Framework

Although the curriculum and the legislation are relied upon as guiding principles in education, the teachers as private individuals with a public mission to educate generations of citizens have the potential and possibility to enmesh their personal opinion with these state regulations and, if deemed necessary, go against them (Parkison, 2013, p. 23). An example of this dissent brought up by the interviewees is the aforementioned topic gender inclusive language, which also politically charges their interpretations of school policies. As politics enter schools through the regulation of language such as through the bans on gender inclusive language (*Innenminister Joachim Herrmann…*, 2023; *Règles De Féminisation…*, n.d.), hegemonic understandings of gendered language become reinforced. The teachers who find themselves in political disagreement with this ban react defiantly and disclose their thoughts on the policy in how they articulate themselves in our interviews through proclamations of honesty and personal reflections:

> *"I think this measure is absolutely excessive. To ban something like this is so backward. I think that's really bad. So in this respect, as I said, I find this ban extremely backward."*
>
> Hannah, German/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 9)

Having given their personal opinion, teachers make very conscious statements that they are very aware of what they are working with in terms of the curriculum and their duty, and for most justify their actions because of their responsibility towards their students in offering them a better education (Nathalie, p. 4; Marie,

p. 1). When it comes to policies with which they disagree, teachers increasingly choose to act independently from the framework they are subjected to, because they "*don't care about that*" (Mathilde, p. 11) or for some because they specifically want to resist. Marie, for example, specifies that she would use inclusive language even more after a ban, as a manifestation of her disagreement with it (p. 12). Practices then become an embodiment of dissent:

"I would probably do more gender inclusive language out of spite than before. And I mean, I'm a GEW[10] member, so let them sue me. Then I have legal protection [...]."

Marie, German/ English - Germany (p. 12)

Illustrated here, and also mentioned by several other participants, resisting teachers are particularly mindful about potential reactions to their criticism of the norms and the absence of repercussions on them. Marie (p. 1), Nathalie (p. 4), Simon (p. 17) all explicitly foresee the fact that they might be "*hate[d] on*", commented on or threatened to be fired, but also anticipate that these actions would not have an impact on them, or that they would know how to react. Similarly to our previous observations of their juggling with standard and norms, it is clear that there is a strong awareness of what is an 'acceptable' resistance while also being acutely in touch with the fact that they are civil servants (Sabine, p. 5). This can be applied to a larger scale than the gender inclusive language ban, when teachers explicitly criticize political actors such as Marie who "*probably called them Nazis, too*" referring to the AfD[11] (p. 7), or Fred who explains:

[10] GEW is a German teachers' union.

[11] Right-wing populist political party in Germany.

"[...] for example, they can tell that I'm not a big Trump fan. But it's not a big thing either (laughs), it's not an extremely strong or assertive opinion or anything, it's a bit of a shared thing, let's say"

Fred, History/ Geography - France (p. 4)

Here, they both justify this expression of political opinions by the idea that they are shared, and not so controversial, and promoting democratic values (Beutel, 2012, p. 15; Strandbrink, 2017, pp. 35, 37). Teachers seem more confident and less exposed in sharing their political opinions when they find themselves in a consensus about them with the majority. However, this tendency must remain moderate, since teachers are facing very diverse audiences who might have diverging opinions. This difficulty was illustrated by Mathilde, who states that "*it would be very, very complicated for [her] to have a sort of very far-right group in my class*" (p. 8) because she tends to share her political views on gender and her feminism with students.

Thus, while the expression of political resistance and opinions seems to be a widely spread practice amongst teachers, they are navigating this practice carefully to respect and accommodate the diverse perspectives of their students, ensuring culturally responsive education (Sherwood et al., 2021; Caingcoy, 2023), but also and primarily within the framework of what they consider justifiable for themselves.

Adapting Official Training to Be a Teacher

Early influences in teacher education can have a major impact on how teachers implement practices in the careers ahead of them. Aligning with our interpretations about how teachers are situated in and impacted by a specific social context, we connect these reflections to this chapter on teacher training and emphasize how educators interpret how to act within their social spheres (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, pp. 174-175). Already during their academic journey, generations of teachers are being raised in culturally reproducing universities, where they are taught a set of norms and equipped with

recommendations for pedagogical practices (Hannah, p. 15). Their outlook on this knowledge they acquired prior to being a teacher changes as soon as they are confronted with the realities of practical teaching experiences (Fred, p. 11; Hannah, p. 4; Hortense, pp. 9-10; Raphael, p. 4). Hannah exemplifies this development by stating:

"You've also done your readings, you've studied and now you do it this way and that and you have to assert yourself with new methods: "So this group work, that's such rubbish", "But we learned that at university, and you have to do it during your traineeship". And the older you get, the more likely you are to say: "My God, I don't need that anymore"."

Hannah, German/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 15)

This divide between the knowledge passed on in the education of teachers and their later professional surroundings expresses itself in the interviews as a bigger issue when regarding the topic of gender. With an outlook on the future, a large amount of the research participants feels like they are standing on uncertain ground regarding the education of their students about matters of gender (Charlotte, p. 6, 9; Hannah, p. 1; Hortense, p. 1; Mathilde, p. 1; Nathalie, p. 16; Raphael, p. 13; Sabine, p. 2). The ones mentioned explicitly stated their wish for more training and guidance while some of them specified for example in interacting with non-binary students (Sabine, p. 2). Claiming how helpless she feels (Nathalie, p. 16), one of the teachers explains:

"It'll come, but we're not at all ready for it. We're not at all trained for it, we don't know, we're still going to do things in a very clumsy, inexperienced way."

Nathalie, Physical Education - France (p. 15)

This is confirmed by Hortense, evoking the content of their classes in the university (p. 10) and Raphael who, by his intern status, testifies from the lack of evolution in this regard with no addition in the teachers' education curriculum (p.

5). In contrast to this, both Mathilde who was trained to be a sociologist before being a teacher and now offers extensive courses on gender to her students (p. 3), and Marie who, driven by personal conviction, initiated a pride workshop at her secondary school (p. 5), are able to counter this guideline-driven line of thought due to their personal interest in the topic of gender which they then turned into initiative. Similarly, this can also be applied to Nathalie (p. 2) who took part in a workshop on discrimination and is now more attentive to matters of gender in her own behaviors and social surroundings, while Fred explains that he is not involved in gender-related activities outside his job (p. 14). Among our interviewees, those who transgress hegemonic ideas in their personal experiences are more likely to transgress the norm in their teaching practices. What we draw from this is that differing interests of people lead to differing training and therefore to different practices. Lessons are then the reflection of the teachers' individualities, portraying their internal sense of agency. Training on gender inclusive practices in the classroom could therefore be used as a tool for change that can help reinforce pre-existing values, but also offer space for new knowledge to be adopted into the hegemonic structure.

Conclusively, our research participants demonstrate a strong awareness and acknowledgment of the norms shaping their environments, and offer nuanced interpretations of them. Seeing guidelines as a base of support or as boundaries to cross, they exercise their self-determination and professional autonomy to align them with their personal opinions and ideals. Overall, they navigate and balance these intersecting dynamics in the best interest of their students whom they always prioritize.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

In this section, we explore the teachers' individual perception of the professional aspect of their job, which we give an outline to with the findings of our previous categories. Here, we center the analysis on the self-determined requirements and implications in terms of identity spanning from being a student-centered mission, and it invites participants to play a role in achieving their objectives. Therefore, we uncover a degree of self-effacement of the individual behind the position while aiming for neutrality.

A Professional Commitment to Students

Not only in their practices, but also when talking about their objectives and goals, do our participants unanimously and primarily express a focus on their pupils, their needs and their development throughout education. They notify the specificity of their occupation, with Marie mentioning in this regard a "*sense of mission*" (p. 8; Fabienne, p. 18; Fred, p. 11; Mathilde, p. 18), Sabine a "*calling more than a profession*" (p. 20) which can be further characterized as student-centered (Simon, p. 14). They also acknowledge their educational duty, identifying that they are meant to transmit knowledge on their specific subjects and make students learn (Axel, p. 21; Hortense, p. 9; Raphael, p. 16; Sabine, p. 5). This conception of their profession as a voluntarily chosen engagement comes with a sense of accomplishment that achievement provides to the teachers. With this, there is a strongly normative perspective widely shared about teaching correctly and "*giv[ing] good lessons every day*" (Sabine, p. 11). What stands out from the data is the idea that there is "*somehow more beyond the school subject*" (Sabine, p. 20) and Raphael explains that even though he considered it his priority at first, it only lasted for a short time, and he now considers that teaching should not happen "*at all costs*" (p. 3), but aims to ensure that "*as many people as possible, or the whole class, that would be ideal, should be able to grasp and follow the course*" (p. 3). Hortense summarizes this balance between content and pedagogy and the relationship between both components of educational practices:

"So I have disciplinary objectives: they need to know how a heart works, for example, but in learning how a heart works, they also need to learn to work in a team, in a group, to respect each other, to argue, to be rigorous in their reasoning, to build this reasoning with the eyes of others. For me, it's completely linked."

Hortense, Biology - France (p. 9)

Teaching thus becomes a more pedagogical than knowledge-oriented practice (Sabine, p. 10), to find strategies to "*get [the] students to learn things and actually progress*" (Fred, p. 11). Legitimate knowledge (Apple, 2013, p. 23; Au, 2023, p. 13; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; Young, 2009, p. 13) moves into the background and is outweighed quickly by broader moral concerns (Ivinson & Murphy, 2007, p. 59), but learning stays central in the interviewees' description of their aspirations and expectations regarding their students and their own actions. This shift in priorities enables overcoming the potential subject-related divides and creates a shared teacher's identity in the social group. Despite the variety of subjects, nationalities, and experiences, it is possible to identify a general and global target by all our research participants, and best illustrated by Raphael in the following quote:

"It's about teaching students to think for themselves, to have their own ideas, to become their own citizens. And that's my goal - that's the goal of every teacher"

Raphael, History/ Geography - France (p. 14)

In this sentence, he encompasses the different dimensions standing out in the attempts to define what a teacher aims for in an ideal definition of it, while also addressing their tendency to universalize. School and educational institutions are seen as an opportunity for children and teenagers to learn 'life'. The teachers are very clear about their goal to initiate a "*transmission*" (Nathalie, p. 8) with their students, in order for them to become critical thinkers. Indeed, all our research participants indicate their wish to make students think and open their eyes to a

broader society in a critical way (Fabienne, p. 9; Hannah, p. 14; Raphael, pp. 13-14). Nathalie explains that she wants students to be curious and autonomous (p. 8), Simon to make them use their brains (p. 19). This translates in the practices of giving students tools and references to understand the world, and "*then it's up to the students to seize them, for those who are interested*" (Fred, p. 15), reminiscing on the idea that students are also in a period of their lives in which they are contradicting all forms of authority in an attempt to find their way between distinct perspectives (Fabienne, p. 9; Mathilde, p. 4), and with this less likely to embrace a ready-made answer. Teaching thus becomes a transactional way to promote student agency as a practice of empowerment. Fabienne (p. 18) and Mathilde (pp. 15-16) also insist on the broader context and frameworks students evolve in, making school a preparation for them to fit into society and be appropriately integrated as "*future citizens, future adults*" (Raphael, p. 3) mirroring what the teachers themselves aim to be. In this regard, teachers are both products of and ambassadors of a culturally reproducing society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996; DiAngelo, 2016, p. 29; Frønes, 2016, pp. 2-3). We can argue here that teachers have a strong awareness of what is their scope of action, both in terms of content and time. Consequently, our interviewees specify that they aspire to be "*sowing seeds*" (Hortense, p. 5) in the pupils' heads, because their objective is that "*in the long run, it sinks in*" (Fred, p. 6):

"My goal as a teacher is for the children to go out after graduation and say: "I've learned something.""

Hannah, German/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 14)

Two conclusions can be drawn from these deliberations: teachers are on a mission to make their students 'better people', offering a quite normative perspective on society, and through this aim at helping them build their individualities, own opinions and critical thoughts.

Playing their Part as Teachers

Having uncovered what the objectives of teachers are, we now delve deeper into the methods and strategies they implement to achieve them. Because of the nature of the teaching profession, and the aforementioned objectives the participants are looking up to, achievement in this regard comes through successful interactions with the students. For instance, while Sabine talks about being a role model (p. 10), for most it is a matter of being a vehicle for passing on information and fading behind their function (Hannah, p. 5; Simon, pp. 13, 14). When discussing their role as teachers, they all offer different perspectives that come together in their essence and nature, positioning themselves more as a sparring partner than as a ready solution, echoing the notion of reactivity they are subjected to and explored earlier:

"I put myself in the position, let's say, of moderator of the debate"
Hortense, Biology - France (p. 6)

Our research participants see themselves as a "*discussion partner*" (Axel, p. 5), a "*mediator*" (Hannah, p. 5), a "*provider of help for thinking and learning things*" (Marie, p. 8), etc. There is a conscious adjustment of their role in the classroom to adapt to the point they want to reach, illustrated by Hannah's statement about how she has to be "*an opponent*" for her students (p. 4) in order to help them develop their critical thinking abilities. Students seem to become the principal actors in the classroom, contradicting the pre-existing power relations of the stage setting (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 54; Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 51). Operationalizing our dramaturgical metaphor of the social world, we see here that teachers are directing the educational play by the choices and the influence they have on its composition. While this is negotiated behind the scenes, they also become performers when they take on this role in front of their students and enter the classroom:

"I see myself as a bit of an entertainer, standing in the classroom like that, it's a bit like my stage on which I perform."

Sabine, English/ Physical Education - Germany (p. 10)

Teaching thus becomes a conscious performance. The essence of the teacher's position makes the stage on which its actors stand visible to them (Johnson & McElroy, 2010, pp. 3, 4), in opposition to the 'social stage' theorized by Goffman which often remains hidden in the broader societal understanding. There is a conscious "*role*" embraced by our participants in their professional environments (Hannah, p. 5; Mathilde, p. 15; Charlotte, p. 5; Hannah, p. 10). Raphael compares it explicitly to acting (p. 7) and going back to the previous quote of Sabine (p. 10), it is possible to connect their ideas to Fred's statement that "*the teacher is a character that the students identify*" (p. 12). Consequently, we can see there is a purposeful action of the individuals to create this persona as a teacher, which is adaptive and responsive to the students as well as proactive in creating an environment in which students can express themselves, interact and grow. This whole process is facilitated by culturally embedded norms guiding the educational interactions.

This engagement in taking a predefined role is determining the relationship with the students the teachers are creating, and the possibility to "*play the teacher*" (Mathilde, p. 15) give them control over the interaction. The imbalance of power in the classroom is reinforced by the possibilities for the educators to decide how and what they want to display of their personality, and to what extent they share personal experiences of themselves with the students. Mathilde testifies of her "*very controlled*" (p. 15) choice of the stories she allows herself to share with the students. The limits are set with care, but also offer the possibility to transgress them. Stepping over the boundaries and challenging the standards of actions instead of choosing the easy solution of playing by the rules implies a complete redefinition of all the expectations which every social interaction is necessarily based on (Fabienne, p. 2; Brickell, 2022, p. 264; Raab, 2022, p. 83).

This tension pushes teachers to balance this multiple and complex performance of identity:

"I'm very much in my place as a teacher and I don't get out of it. I can get out of it when we're in a one-to-one interview, when there's a student in distress or with parents [...] But I'm still a teacher."

Fabienne, French - France (p. 7)

There is a measured flexibility in the teaching performance, reflecting the autonomy given to the individuals, where maintaining professional boundaries is crucial, yet there is room for empathy and personal connection when needed. Embracing a highly personalized role might drive one away from the traditional image of a teacher (Makovec, 2018, p. 33), and thus the powerful status attributed to them, leading the students to dissent from the established hierarchy in the educational setting (Raphael, p. 6). Indeed, teachers must also perform authority and composure to manage a classroom full of students simultaneously, even when they might not feel empowered personally. This act of pretending an assertive posture illustrates the delicate balance teachers maintain between authority and approachability, crucial for effective classroom management and student engagement. Simon elaborates on the necessity of such performance:

"I think because you just have to deal with 30 people at the same time, you have to mimic a sovereign person, which unfortunately personally you aren't, usually."

Simon, English/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 13)

Even though this reflection on role-playing is transversal to all the research participants, the theme of authority appears relatively limited to the two interns. Indeed, similarly to Simon, Raphael indicates that he didn't share with the pupils his inexperience in teaching to avoid encountering difficulties in class management or having to re-assert his legitimacy in front of students and parents (p. 6). On the other hand, the interviewees with more experience give very little

importance to this and appear more confident in their role, which they seem to navigate in an easier manner.

Just as we uncovered above with norms and legislation serving to guide them, the act of playing a role provides reassurance to teachers, enabling them to exercise their autonomy and orient their practices to align with their individually determined goals.

From Imposed Neutrality towards an Attempt of Objectivity

Playing a role is an effective way to convey a specific image, and with this also a way for teachers to present the apparent neutrality they are expected to. Political impartiality, despite being an official requirement for civil servants, remains unattainable for individuals, and therefore for teachers as well (Richards & Phelps, 2020, p. 3; Strandbrink, 2017, pp. 53-54; Wieland, 2019, p. 1). We then focus on the duty of neutrality incumbent on teachers, which is implemented by national legislation (*Devoirs de réserve…,* n.d.; *Gesetz zur Regelung des Statusrechts…*, n.d.). However, as we uncovered before in the previous chapter, teachers are highly likely to play with the rules imposed on them and to rearrange them exercising their agency. More than neutrality, we can investigate here the objectivity of teachers. This shift in vocabulary moves the issue from the absence of opinion to its non-expression, at the same time making it pragmatic and resulting in practice by "*not tak[ing] sides"* (Simon, p. 8) to stay in the expected role of the teacher. In this regard, our research participants acknowledge a duty of neutrality (Raphael, p. 8; Simon, p. 6) they have to comply with as civil servants:

"We can't convey our political or religious ideas or anything else, but I do try to - there are things that seem important to me to express to students."

Raphael, History/ Geography - France (p. 8)

Therefore, even though he is not sharing his opinion openly and explicitly, Raphael takes a stance on what he thinks is necessary to share with the pupils. Similarly,

Simon emphasizes the idea that he thinks the students "*want that, too*" (p. 7). The focus is placed on the students and their best interest to justify practices which could be considered transgressive of the norms. Teachers are thus claiming to be discussing political topics not out of personal interest but as a professional and educational practice aiming to promote ideas they believe beneficial for their students and supporting democratic values. The self-determined duty to enlighten their students is superimposed onto their 'official' duty of neutrality, making this transgression of the norm a moral necessity. Marie illustrates this fine line of balance, showing that she does not want to create a debate over her opinion but still feel free not to refrain from composing with neutrality:

"Well, I don't agitate in class. That's only when there's-. So I mean in English then I express-. Then I express my opinion that I think Trump is a dangerous idiot."

Marie, German/ English - Germany (p. 7)

The example of the criticism of Donald Trump she takes here is also employed by Fred (p. 4), who explains that he is open about this personal consideration because *"it's not a big thing either (laughs), it's not an extremely strong or assertive opinion or anything, it's a bit of a shared thing, let's say*" (p. 4). More than not sharing personal perspectives, it is about not disclosing controversial political opinions to the students for both teachers. This can be seen as reflecting a general societal habit of embracing more easily widely shared beliefs in front of a group. The power scheme in the classroom places teachers in a dominant position (Apple, 2013, p. 98; Bainbridge Frymier & Houser, 2009, p. 208; Jamir et al., 2019, p. 317; Koutrouba et al., 2012, p. 185; Young, 2009, p. 17) despite their numerical minority. From there, they explain that the will to not create a debate in which they would have to hold a certain position comes from an awareness of the weight their words can have and a tentative to help students to *"decide for themselves"* (Axel, p. 6). Some of our research participants (Hannah, p. 2; Hortense, p. 13) thus

explain that their desire to refrain from expressing political opinions originates in the power dynamics at play to not "*do[] the wrong thing*" (Hortense, p. 2):

"I don't want to confront them with my opinion, which might affect them too much or push them into an opposing position, I don't want that"
Hannah, German/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 2)

Teachers explicitly aim with this to avoid unduly influencing students outside of the democratic or republican objectives they uphold (Marie, p. 6; Raphael, p. 3; Simon, p. 6), which are in fact already testifying of a political positioning. From there, the question of teachers' objectivity ultimately revolves around how their opinions are displayed and expressed in the open. It is not so much a question of concealing their opinions completely but rather to not express them too vocally. Teachers often engage in a form of performative objectivity, presenting themselves as neutral (Axel, p. 3) to maintain their professional role. However, this sort of 'neutrality' is not as deeply rooted as it might seem; rather, it serves as a pragmatic approach to maintain educational boundaries and prevent overt biases in the classroom making it a vain proclamation. This idea is supported in our data with two techniques from the teachers. Several of them indicate that if they do not disclose their political affiliation, it would be possible for students to guess it (Fred, p. 4; Mathilde, p. 4, Marie, p. 6), while the others state that they would be willing to have a conversation about these topics (Nathalie, p. 9), going as far as Marie being open to revealing her party affiliation (p. 6).

To conclude, being a teacher is aiming for very specific objectives which find their roots in democratic values and the belief that the practice of critical thinking is essential for everyone to engage in. To successfully achieve this goal, they have to play a role encompassing more than an ideal of transmission, but also nurturing a broader development of students as individuals. Teachers engage in this complex task trying not to abuse the pre-existing power imbalance (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164), and attempting to reach neutrality to no avail.

THE INDIVIDUALITY BEHIND THE PROFESSION

Even though the teaching profession calls for a vast commitment, life goes on beyond the teachers' vocation. Teachers are also unique and complex individuals who develop a professional identity which does not replace their initially constructed one but merge the two together (Mockler, 2011, p. 51). Breaking it down to a microlevel, teachers are caught between a multitude of factors influencing their self-determination.

A Multi-Faceted Responsibility

Being a teacher comes with its share of challenges and specificities, one of them residing in the lack of natural assessment of the teachers' performance. Indeed, even though in most systems teachers are regularly grading students and giving feedback on their progress, the evaluation mechanisms towards teachers are often limited in scope and frequency. Therefore, teachers are themselves taking on the responsibility of 'doing their job' in what they estimate is the correct way, permitted by the trust society places in them. Setting a professional goal thus falls under the individual authority of teachers, who become the ones to decide which lessons to work and rework (Fred, p. 12; Sabine, p. 11). In this regard, a majority of teachers underline the idea that they shift their focus not to the sole performance of students and their knowledge about a topic, but more to their understanding of global processes (Fred, p. 11; Hannah, p. 4; Mathilde, pp. 4, 15, 16 ; Nathalie, p. 8; Raphael, pp. 5, 13-14; Sabine, p. 10; Simon, pp. 9, 22). Consequently, a successful teaching experience can be assessed only by the teachers themselves as it does not appear through material indicators. While this critical reflection on their profession could be overlooked, their sense of mission guides teachers to acknowledging the responsibility they have:

"As I said, I have a teaching goal that I want to achieve and at the end of each day, I think, you should want to be able to look at yourself in the mirror and see whether you've been able to give them what you set out to do."

Sabine, English/ Physical Education - Germany (p. 19)

Even though there is a sense of duty to be professionally competent (Charlotte, p. 5), the responsibility also implies taking time to explain what there is to explain and address (Hannah, p. 4) when it comes to behaviors of students for example to "*train future citizens*" (Nathalie, p. 8). While acknowledging that the hours spent in the classroom are primarily dedicated to teaching (Hannah, p. 6; Raphael, p. 5), teachers have to find a balance allowing them to dedicate time to additional challenges they consider important within the classroom, such as correcting sexist behaviors by their students (Marie, p. 4; Simon, p. 21). Self-responsibility is thus what is directing teachers' actions, and specifically in instances of conflict. Their individual definition of priorities dictates the outcome of their practices and thus marks the shift towards the personal realm. Charlotte insists on the necessity to "*make sure it is sorted out*" (p. 8), while Fabienne gives her explanation to the sense of responsibility she feels regarding such concerns:

"Yes, because anything I would let go past me is my fault if I don't react, yeah, I legitimize it in a way, you know?"

Fabienne, French - France (p. 9)

In practice, for many teachers this means setting certain standards (Axel, p. 21) and defining exactly what they "*don't want to hear*" in the classroom (Marie, p. 4) despite their awareness of the fact that they are "*not the one[s] responsible for who [the students] are"* outside of the classroom, and are only trying to *"get them to think about [life] a bit"* (Mathilde, p. 9). The geographical and intellectual space of the classroom is where the discourse of the teacher rules, and both parties are aware of its limitations on a larger scale in society. For this reason, teachers aim

to instill a sense of self-responsibility in their students. There is a balancing act from teachers to exercise and provide agency:

"I prefer to try and find strategies that - well, on the one hand, that enable me to ensure that my territory of autonomy is respected, but that also enable the students, by example, to find ways of acting and being and speaking that also ensure that those around them respect a territory that is necessary to them."
Fabienne, French - France (p. 16)

Applying this to the domination system surrounding gender, teaching is encouraging students to do and be themselves with particular regards to the girls, who they recognize as having a greater need for it due to their differentiated behaviors (Charlotte, p. 8; Fabienne, p. 15; Fred, p. 15; Hortense, p. 2; Simon, p. 13):

"I try to support the girls. That they dare to do more. That they can be more demanding."
Hannah, German/ History/ Social Studies - Germany (p. 8)

In order to enable students to decide for themselves, teachers are offering them a stable ground to build their ideas on and a framework in which it is acceptable to position themselves (Axel, p. 5; Fred, p. 11; Marie, p. 13; Simon, p. 13). Establishing the 'correctness' of behaviors based on their own beliefs, teachers express the fact that there is no universal responsibility incumbent on them and decide to strategically refer to curricula or legislation when they find themselves overwhelmed by critical situations. The unique experience of education involves emotions coming into play in the classroom, on both the teachers' (Fred, p. 13; Mathilde, p. 14) and the students' part (Hortense, p. 1; Simon, pp. 2, 10), reiterating the intrusion of private matters in the professional field. Personal and emotional factors significantly influence teacher-student relationships and teaching practices. When a student addressed her using masculine terms,

Mathilde perceived this as a very violent comment that denied her feminine identity (pp. 5-6), underlining the deeply personal impact of such interactions and hindering a harmonious relationship with this pupil. Similarly, Hannah with her "*likes and dislikes"* (p. 7), and Simon with different levels of care (p. 21) lead them to disclose a stronger affinity with some students than others. However, the duty of teachers limits the repercussions these affinities have in practice. Also, this was brought to light by our research participants in the context of interviews and not in front of their students, bringing once again the performative aspect of teaching to the forefront.

Recalling our previous observation, teachers are however mostly 're-acting' and their personal involvement is often an answer to specific instances originating in students' narratives (Hortense, p. 10; Simon, p. 21). Talking about the case of a transgender pupil, Fred explains that he might want to go further than his role requires to ensure the wellbeing of his student, similarly to Raphael (p. 6):

"If we feel that there's a fragility, that there's a lot of stuff, yeah, it's just that the student feels that I know that he exists, you know what I mean."
Fred, History/ Geography - France (p. 14)

Teachers embrace responsibility on different levels, having to perform good practices and taking care of the students they are engaging with because of their dominant position. With their awareness of their status, the interviewees also aim to give agency to the pupils to not overstep their understanding of their pedagogical role, while also acknowledging that as future adults, students will need to manage it themselves.

Aligning Private Values and Professional Ambitions towards Authenticity

Responsibility is the intersection of the private and personal sphere and compels teachers to actively negotiate the double bind that they find themselves in a transparent manner. As we concluded previously, teachers acknowledge that they are playing a role in order to appear in a certain way in front of their students but

also align it with their private identities and principles in substance (Charlotte, p. 4; Fabien, p. 12; Hortense, p. 10; Marie, pp. 7, 15; Nathalie, p. 10; Sabine, p. 18). With this congruence in values and interests throughout the performance, teachers can stay the "*same person*" inside and outside the classroom (Fabienne, p. 4; Raphael, p. 8):

"Well, it's basically the same, it's just that I can wear shirts to work but I'm not going to do it at home because you have to iron and it's a pain, so I'm putting them on those 3 days when I have class. I think my students see me in a certain way and I don't know, my family sees me in a certain way and it's not the same thing, but then it's – I'm very aligned. I mean, what I think is important in my work is also what's important outside my work, et cetera. So, of course, there's continuity, and direct continuity."

Mathilde, Social Sciences - France (p. 15)

However, as illustrated by Mathilde in the above quotation, the teacher identity offers a greater performative dimension than the private one (Johnson & McElroy, 2010, pp. 3, 4). Teachers are presenting another facet of themselves to their students, enhancing their self-proclaimed exemplary status. They indicate aiming to inspire their students and showing them how to think more than what to think (Axel, p. 7; Fabienne, p. 18; Simon, pp. 4, 13-14). Moreover, Raphael insists on this 'republican' orientation given to his performance in the classroom to empower students, which he reflects on immediately, indicating the 'extra' level of attention given to it as a teacher (p. 3). With the attention they receive as educators, they have to be more careful about every single action, which leads them to being explicitly performing. Similarly to Hortense (p. 10), Axel indicates that if thinks the same outside of the classroom, he would perform differently and be less didactic on the broader social stage, as compared to the classroom:

"I don't go there and lecture them. I don't do that now, but in my immediate environment with people I'm dealing with, I would say something."

Axel, Biology/ Chemistry - Germany (p. 15)

As a result of their sense of responsibility towards their students, teachers are more explicit in addressing situations which they can consider problematic, such as sexist events. With this, we can begin to outline the limits of their role as teacher, which does not include "*wear[ing] a mask*" (Fabienne, p. 5; Hortense, p. 10), in the sense of changing personality. This honesty in who they are and what interests them is described very positively by several teachers (Fabienne, pp. 4, 5; Hortense, p. 10; Mathilde, p. 8; Raphael, p. 7), with Fabienne also explaining that it would be "*very tiring to change personality in front of the students"* (p. 5). Despite performing a professional role, teachers are not actors. From there, a dissonance between their true selves and their professional personas can be challenging and psychologically demanding (Brady, 2022, pp. 95-96). For educators, this misalignment can impair engagement with students and the delivery of meaningful content (Miller & Pedro, 2006, p. 296). Creating and maintaining authenticity fosters trust and honesty in the classroom, leading to stronger teacher-student relationships and a more effective educational environment:

"Even if sometimes - it's funny because there are days when, um, I have the impression that even if I'm playing a role and - on the days when things aren't going well, my lessons are maybe less - I'm perhaps less involved myself, and when I'm less involved, I have the impression that the students feel it too. And conversely, on days when I'm really into it, so are the students, and it's a win-win situation for both parties."

Raphael, History/ Geography - Germany (p. 7)

Being 'aligned' is an instrument of integrity for the teachers, helping in creating a sincere relationship with their students. Several teachers highlight the facility

this brings to them in their daily practices (Fabienne, Hortense, Fred), while serving pedagogical purposes at the same time (Fabienne, p. 7; Raphael, p. 16, Sabine, p. 8). With students perceived as capable of understanding who the teachers are and their characters (Fabienne, p. 4; Mathilde, p. 4; Simon, p. 14), authenticity becomes a necessity to nurture the trust they aim for (Fred, pp. 2-3; Raphael, p. 5; Sabine, p. 10; Simon, p. 5). Bringing individuality to the lessons can also entail a certain personification of the function for the teachers, strengthening the bond they have with the pupils. However, authenticity and transparency do not mean exhaustivity in the reporting of their private lives, but more the creation of bridges between personal and professional.

A misalignment between a teacher's role and their private personality can hinder their effective teaching where authenticity is essential for both teachers and their students. Therefore, teachers integrate aspects of their own identity into their professional persona. This balance enables teachers to remain engaging and to establish meaningful connections with their students, improving the entire learning environment. Authenticity in teaching therefore involves a dynamic interplay between professional responsibilities and personal identity, guaranteeing that the educational setting is successful in the eye of the teacher.

Variations within the Teacher Group and Personalized Good Practices

Teachers as a group are not members of one homogenous entity, but rather a gathering of individual people. From there, being authentic translates into a variety of practices in the classroom. Even though our interviewees all put students' interest at the center of their ambition, and position themselves as objective guides to lead them, they differ in their interpretation of it.

With the importance given to autonomy and self-determination, the ambition of our research participants to teach 'the right thing' results in a significant normativity in their practices. Despite a shared commitment to these educational principles, teachers exhibit distinct opinions on specific issues like gender for example. We witness throughout the data a wide range of

understandings of the concept, from two biological and distinct genders (Axel, p. 1), to gender as a social construct detached from biological sex (Hortense, p. 1; Mathilde, p. 14):

"There are clearly only two genders biologically, because I can simply prove it"
Axel, Biology/ Chemistry - Germany (p. 1)

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"But we never considered that the 'Other' could be women. [...] for me no, women and men are the same species. You see, it's not an 'Other'."
Fabienne, French - France (p. 17)

This last sentence was uttered while talking about teaching about an 'Other'. We see here that the perspective of Fabienne on gender is directly reflected in what she decided to teach and propose to her students. This reflection which she came to during the interview testifies of the situated objectivity teachers implement, that in this case she directly explains in the light of her understanding of gender as a "*genetic accident*" (p. 1). There is always the potential for an unconscious influence of their understanding of society in teaching practices, contradicting their claimed attempt towards neutrality.

These distinctions in the opinions find their origins in their earlier education (Charlotte, p. 2; Hannah, p. 14; Hortense, p. 7; Marie, p. 8; Mathilde, p. 10; Sabine, p. 15; Simon, p. 1), family socialization and life (Fabienne, pp. 1, 3; Hortense, p. 9; Marie, pp. 15, 16; Nathalie, p. 10; Sabine, p. 6; Simon, p. 17), the subject they have expertise in (Axel, p. 5; Hortense, pp. 8-9), their career (Hannah, p. 1; Fabienne, p. 5; Fred, pp. 2, 11; Marie, p. 1; Nathalie, p; 12), and their private beliefs (Sabine, p. 9). Even if some of them are conscious of the influences of these on teaching practices, they are still unavoidable, or to some degree at least. We can explore here more in detail instances of these crucial and pivotal bindings. Firstly, when discussing grading systems, Sabine recounts her year in America and her life there in order to explain her point of view. She explains that, while shaping her understanding of the world, her participation in sports competitions

also influences her current positive assessment of gendered grading tables in Physical Education classes now:

"And I myself, I spent a year in America and studied at a liberal arts college. [...] and I think that had a very strong influence on me during that year and it was more like diving into a whole new world for me as a Bavarian girl from the countryside."

Sabine, English/ Physical Education - Germany (p. 15)

In a similar manner, Hannah (p. 14) and Raphael (pp. 13-14) recall their own personal experiences to explain their wishes for their students to explore a wider world than the one they are exposed to on a daily basis. The interviewees recognize the importance of the diversity of representations and thus, self-reflect on the fact that their individuality is inherently situated which brings them to make an effort to compensate for it by implementing specific practices for their students. This shows in the likes of fieldtrips among other activities (Hannah, p. 14; Raphael, pp. 13-14). On the other hand, some teachers diversify the contents of the curriculum according to their own preferences, however always being mindful of their students' interests, exemplifying the authenticity they aspire to. Correspondingly, Mathilde identifies her gender and racial identity as the justification behind her career orientations and classroom practices, recognizing both the gaps and the distinctive features that this position can have on the way she teaches (p. 14):

"I'm studying gender because I'm a woman, that's clear. And of course I wouldn't do as much if I were a man and, for example, I know very well that I'm much less sensitive, for example, to issues of race because I'm white and so I'm not subject to racism and so of course that necessarily brought things to the fore and that's why for me it's important to do something about it, clearly."

Mathilde, Social Sciences - France (p. 3)

Consequently, even though the ideal of objectivity seems difficult to attain for teachers, the combination of the "*6, 7, 8 teachers*" a class has (Raphael, p. 3) in secondary education may be a step towards it by the diversity of their individualities. With their differences in opinions, in teaching practices and in personalities, the collaboration of a larger board of educators offers a wide range of examples for the students to pick and choose from, promoting a more comprehensive and balanced educational experience.

Teachers are situated individuals in a local context transmitting bigger ideas to a body of students in the shape of legitimate knowledge. Our analysis of the self-perception of teachers leads us to see them as actors and directors in the search for gender inclusivity on the educational stage. In a responsive and powerful position, they balance dissent and compliance to norms to educate their students in the 'best way', being influenced primarily by their own identities more than any external factor.

DISCUSSION

Building on our initial quote by the French Academy about language condemning the emphasis on gender in inclusive language practices and their assumption that teachers encounter difficulties in this regard (Académie Française, n.d.), our analysis reveals that teachers are actually open to its use and offer individual interpretations and strategies on how to proceed to ensure a use of language which allows for a 'broader expression of thought'. After all, teachers as individual people have the autonomy to choose their discursive practices (Cameron, 2012, p. 2, Talja et al., 2005, p. 89).

On the microlevel of the individual, their classroom, and their own identity, our interviewees affirm having power over what they do, which makes them feel like they are constructing in a personalized way the environment they want to offer to the students. However, enriching our perspective by widening our horizon, the teachers' voices unite in a common discourse. We observe a tension between the declarative statements of our participants and our findings, which highlights a divergence between their self-perceived uniqueness and their position in the collective picture revealed by our research. Academic conceptualization is an efficient way to detach conclusions from self-reported personal narratives and their inherent biases, which can help shape further actions by other stakeholders (Tracy, 2010, p. 838) and find commonalities between different research cases. More than just between individual stories, we uncover with our comparative design an analogy between the personal understandings teachers in France and Germany have of their profession and practices. This cross-national congruence confirms that teachers are bound together by strong societal ties creating a cohesive social group and transcending the national boundaries.

Because of how society is constructed, people's professional performances are inextricably linked to their personal identity (Fajardo Castañeda, 2013, p. 131; Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 49, 57; Makovec, 2018, p. 33; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018, pp. 183-184). Both reciprocally influence each other, while being determined by

previous and ongoing processes of socialization (Czerniawski, 2011, p. 43). Following our theoretical framework regarding personalities as socially constructed, teachers, too, are shaped through their life experiences. School, by being one of the primary instances of socialization, offers all individuals common references at the beginning of their lives. In the specific case of teachers, we see here their confrontation with their own educators as an anticipated professional socialization process (Biesta, 2015, p. 19; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 43; Everit & Tefft, 2019, p. 571), presenting multiple examples and counterexamples for them to question through their own vocational practices. This opportunity for early extensive engagement with their future choice of career creates a stronger image of the teacher's identity which they can draw inspiration from to build the role and the persona they perform in their professional life, and offer a critical perspective on it. Societal expectations reproduced by citizens also having been subjected to mandatory schooling such as policy makers, colleagues, parents and students, about who a teacher ought to be, continue to shape the teachers' identities (Makovec, 2018, p. 33) and giving them a special status in a broader context than the educational field (Strandbrink, 2017, p. 36).

These commonalities we revealed from the consensus of our research participants can be approached from a socio-economic perspective. Teaching as a profession stands out by being held in high regard, compensating its economical limits with a greater cultural value (Young, 2009, p. 14). By the nature of their vocation, teachers are in possession of an extensive amount of 'knowledge of the powerful' enabling them to access the upper strata of the social hierarchy and participate in an intellectual 'elite' (Young, 2009, pp. 13-14). Similar combination of economic power and legitimate culture by individuals tends to orient their political views in a comparable way, thus making teachers a unified group in this regard and explaining the constitution of a relatively coherent entity (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 268, 512). Even though our research participants displayed different political affiliations, this concordance is reflected in their attachment to the democratic values and the importance they give to critical thinking. Because they are ingesting and passing on this legitimate knowledge based on their political

understanding of the world, it is self-evidently the nucleus to their powerful, hegemonically induced status. While women usually constitute a social minority in a global perspective, through our comprehensive analysis, we come to understand that female teachers find themselves in a relatively favorable position, due to the competition their gender identity stands in with their profession and despite belonging to a group marginalized by hegemonically patriarchal society. This exemplifies the intermingling between the teachers' professional social standing and their individualities, such as the aspect of gender, and offers an intersectional perspective.

To take this discussion further, even though teaching is the main reason for teachers having access to this knowledge, we observe this to be reflected in the continuous performance of their identities. By knowing the rules of the society they take part in and fully understanding their emanations, they possess the power to negotiate them according to their own interpretations (Apple, 2013, pp. 19-20; Bourdieu, 1979, p. 284; Young, 2009, p. 10). The internalization of such a social status directly shapes their identities and their perception of both society and themselves. While not being able to come to conclusions about people's own personalities, we observed through our data a didactic and scholastic use of "*the* language*"* (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45) by teachers permanently reinforcing their sovereignty over the social norms. In particular on the classroom stage, having the monopoly on speech leads teachers to always showcase their professional identity, while being closely scrutinized by their students. Going back to our conceptualization of performance as fundamental to social interactions (Brickell, 2022, p. 264; Butler, 2014, p. 76; Raab, 2022, p. 83), it moves here from the background closer to the foreground and becomes a conscious act.

Due to their unique position in shaping future autonomous citizens (Holt-Reynolds, 2000, p. 22), teachers' moral authority comes to expression by way of self-affirmation in their classroom discourse. This implementation of Butler's idea of continuous performance of accrued cultural norms and values in the classroom is the result of constant negotiations of the teacher identity on the social stage through interpersonal interactions as proposed by Goffman (Ashmore & Jussim,

2023, p. 10; Brickell, 2022, p. 264; Butler, 2014, p. 76; Laustsen et al., 2017, p. 180; Raab, 2022, p. 83). Our interviewees frame the role they play according to the self-images they want to project as well as the ones of the students they encounter. Hereby, we connect the teachers' personal positioning with the inherent interactional nature of their profession and the reactive necessity that comes with it. Reminiscent of our analysis where we find prominent examples of teachers' reactivity to the students in front of them, we acknowledge their dominant position in this exchange and the responsibility it generates. By their ownership of '*the* knowledge' putting a spin on '*the* language' in its Bourdieusian understanding, teachers are confronted with the permanent opportunity to exercise symbolic violence over their students (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164) which requires a necessary regulation. Emanating from the interviewees themselves and combined with a lack of systematic external evaluation, this translates into a sense of responsibility which is further enhanced by the calling from which the teaching profession derives.

In this regard, our research participants display a genuine interest in their chosen profession, and this is mirrored in their authentic performance of it and thus prevents any stronger dissonances in identity (Brady, 2022, pp. 95-96). Because of the agency the teachers are able to exert through their own pedagogical practices, they are given the opportunity of aligning their professional and personal beliefs. These reciprocal influences and dynamics between personal and public considerations shape a virtuous cycle of favorable environment for the teachers to evolve in, improving the quality of their teaching performance and giving them a stronger feeling of achievement regarding their professional ambitions. However, this fairness in their actions appears to originate in their personal benefit (Brady, 2022, pp. 95-96) as much as in their sense of duty and in certain instances lead them to transgress hegemonic norms.

What enables teachers to take a critical stance and to break through these culturally reproduced values is their extensive exposure to, education through and contemplation of societally reconstructing hegemony (Apple, 2013, pp. 19-21; Young, 2009, p. 10). Our analysis portrays that in order for teachers to be able to

oppose the system of values which are so normalized that they are understood as being neutral, they have to be closely familiar with them first. In the world of educators, for instance, the dominant system of values is centered on agency and critical thinking, thus making socialization at school of children who become teachers later on in their lives a reproducing process of these ideas. However, these repeated processes of normalization in society can by no means be confused with neutrality. Claims of political neutrality in a society by proposing only one worldview causes the discourse to be inherently charged nonetheless. While our participants, with their culturally inherited and reflexive mastery of these patterns declare their aim to counter this myth by empowering students to take agency (Wieland, 2019, p. 1), the task appears more complex. As a matter of fact, they place themselves at this occasion as the representatives of a normative system which might not align fully with the societally overarching model, but cannot completely escape it either (Apple, 2013, pp. 20-21). Following the assumption of Weber (1947, p. 28), that power can be legitimized and still be considered to be in the interest of the common welfare, we see an analogy between the State which he defines as owning this legitimate authority, and the teachers as its representatives who stand in the position of said authority in the classroom context. Teachers considering themselves to be neutral implies that they are placed in a sufficiently privileged vantage point not to fear or suffer the repercussions of countering the hegemonic system.

With the example of the ban of gender inclusive writing in both France and Germany which sheds light on practices of educational policy making, our interviewees showed that they have the competency to position themselves critically, despite the rules having been passed by a system built on democratic values they are members of. Although their judgements cannot be passed as neutral either, they are presenting a form of challenge to the existing hegemony which opens the opportunity for social change (Apple, 2013, pp. 19-21; Young, 2009, p. 10). This contestation appears in the shape of a reform more than a revolution. As we have explored extensively, teachers have a broad awareness of the role they want and are supposed to have, while knowing where the potential

for independent action is situated. Without defining themselves as activists, most of them freely accept that they would disobey the law if it seems the right thing to do (Geller, 2020, p. 183; Stitzlein, 2016, pp. 117, 139). More than that, in an interactionist context any positioning, or lack of it, reflects a specific intellectual posture.

In this regard, one of the takeaways from this study is that teachers have a tendency towards consensus. If our participants explained that they do not necessarily care about following the law, their dissent is rarely singularized. Standing on the idea that they have professional duties (*Devoirs de réserve…*, n.d.; *Gesetz zur Regelung des Statusrechts…*, n.d.), they appear to act in the way they assert all teachers do or should do for a variety of matters. Despite their critical opinion of the global societal consensus, or the established curriculum, we observe a general trend uniting them towards similar goals. Whether it is with the students, their colleagues, or following the mainstream standards, teachers position themselves in such a way as to avoid any personification of their opinions when in the classroom. As an example, and when talking about gender, feminism is considered a highly polarizing topic in the political world (Butler, 2024, p. 5), leading to a difficulty to find consensus. Throughout our panel of participants, we can identify two divergent positions resulting from this and confirming the teachers' inclination towards consensual positioning. On the one hand, some of them distinguished themselves from feminist postures to embrace a 'humanist' ideal which for them is more inclusive. On the other hand, the remaining participants evoked a broad and comprehensive feminism including all individuals, thus testifying to their affiliation with the concept. All in all, the contradiction resides in the definition of the terms more than in the ideas, with a unanimous aspiration towards openness and universal equality (Beutel, 2012, p. 8; Isac et al., 2011, p. 315; Strandbrink, 2017, p. 35).

All things considered, and going back to our problem formulation, we understand that the interplay of personal mindset with political mandates is constitutive of a teachers' collective professional identity and defines its contours. Strong sense of

duty and the best interest of the students are the main characteristics of this stature which is continuously defined and redefined through performance inside and outside the classroom. Individuality and political mandates are thus being erased to a certain extent behind a collective understanding of a professional role. From there, our research points us towards social identity theory (Rich et al., 2017, p. 342) which we find congruent with our approaches to identity through Goffman's multiple, socially interacted identities as permanently negotiated and reiterated (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 51; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 54; Day et al., 2006, p. 602; Raab, 2022, p. 66). While we began with an individual and personalized standpoint, we are coming to the conclusion through our inductive research design that teachers' behaviors are mostly dedicated to their membership in a larger group and thus, not simply individual to each person, but more "socially contingent" (Rich et al., 2017, p. 342).

Although there is a group identity, becoming a teacher is a matter of individual choice leading to such affiliation rather than an explicit wish to be part of this collective. However, the consequences of belonging to a larger entity is similar, with teachers' performed identities being shaped and influenced by their peers. Social identity theory, in the importance it gives to an individual's surroundings, aligns with Bourdieu's notion of '*habitus'*, where social environments and interactions play a crucial role in forming dispositions, reflecting both our interactionist and social constructionist perspectives. We complexify and nuance our Bourdieusian point of departure by bringing up Lahire's conceptualization of a multiplicity of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1979, 1991; Lahire, 2009, p. 202), which emphasizes the importance of addressing the intersection of several and at times overlapping or contradicting habitus in each individual, similarly to the multiplicity of identities penned by Goffman (Ashmore & Jussim, 2023, p. 51; Czerniawski, 2011, p. 54; Day et al., 2006, p. 602; Raab, 2022, p. 66). We find out in this research that the professional '*habitus'* of teachers shapes their practices while in the classroom, overshadowing their personal and private ones. In his framework, Lahire insists on the idea of observing and investigating individuals' behaviors in different contexts to grasp a comprehensive

understanding of their identities (2009, p. 202). In this regard, we acknowledge the impact of the environment on the data we collected and the analysis resulting from it, which can however, be considered as a new layer of investigation.

Taking a step back to widen our perspective, we think it valuable to reflect and discuss the framing conditions around the data we collected. We insist on the idea that our findings in this research are primarily reporting on our participants' perceptions of their practices, identities and environment, exclusively displaying the teachers' side of the story. At this point, we expand our investigation from the substance to the general framing of our collaboration with the interviewees. Reminiscing on the notion of responsibility and sense of duty, and in the light of the sample method used to gather our pool of participants among our social circles (Bryman, 2012, pp. 201-203), we believe that the positive outcome we achieved can be understood as an expression of teachers' professional identities going beyond the boundaries of the classroom. The data we collected is thus in itself a testimony of the teachers' dedication to the creation of a rich educational environment even in a wider sense (Brady, 2022, p. pp. 107-108; Makovec, 2018, p. 33). In addition to trust, we were able to observe an extended reflection and willingness from our interviewees, who in some cases explicitly expressed their self-doubt about being the adequate person to give us the best answers. The close collaboration we created with them provided for rich, interesting and easily applicable data through which we managed to reach our own academic ambitions of exploring individual lived experiences, by placing their professional teaching identities at the forefront, even ahead of our data collection process. This research can be seen as a first step towards a more expansive study of teaching practices, with its comprehensive nature opening the door to quantitative and more directed research building on the results obtained here and applicable to a larger scale.

This frame for our research contents puts the overall theme of gender in the spotlight of this study through questions centered on practices and marks the second reason why we see our interactions with them as successful. To our participants, but also beyond, gender is not an unknown topic. They have had to

reflect about it on a broader level not only because of its omnipresence in society (Lorber, 1994, p. 13) and recent changes in legislation, but also on a daily classroom level where they are confronted with it in the form of group work or when handling matters pertaining to their transgender students. In a step towards intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), we consider gender as a variable among other identitarian, societally debated topics such as race, social class and religion, through which we can contemplate the social world and which were also touched upon by certain research participants (Fabienne, p. 8; Hortense, pp. 6, 13-14; Mathilde, pp. 15-16; Nathalie, p. 18; Sabine p. 9). We regard the topic of gender as particularly noteworthy because of the existing structural equality of rights that is still not reflected in societal opportunities due to patriarchal hegemony, also reproduced in educational systems (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 86). To cite one of our interviewees in this sense, considering gender as a "*done deal*" in society is a "*big mistake*" (Charlotte, p. 11).

CONCLUSION

Our study demonstrates that teachers are constantly negotiating their personal and professional identities in search of a balance between them and the power-laden political surroundings. Performing in a classroom environment, they express this teacher identity in the shape of gendered discursive and didactic practices which they apply to their students. Raising our research on the intersection of the key concepts of identity, politics and gender through language (see Figure 2) to a broader social level, we find that among the teacher group there is a sense of common identity which echoes across national borders between France and Germany. This shared identity aligns both the private and professional identity in a cohesive way which limits the dissonances. Even though their profession is embedded in and reproduces culturally hegemonic values as representatives of these states, this kind of State-given power enables teachers to exert a strong form of agency over themselves and their professional performance (Young, 2009, pp. 14, 17). The educators as entrusted agents of society can therefore bend political mandates according to their own values and understanding of the world, making them agents of change. However, they only transgress these norms to a certain extent as a result of their decision to embrace this hegemonic teacher role in a perspective of self-achievement. The sense of mission at the origin of their professional commitment naturally leads them to recognize the valuable potential of an educational institution which they themselves come from. In this regard, teachers have a strong awareness of the environment they are situated in and can thus navigate it proficiently. More explicitly, this knowledge enables them to perform in their surroundings without encountering major resistance, because they have the ability to anticipate and thus avoid potential conflicts (Czerniawski, 2011, pp. 53, 57).

However, the educational field in which teachers act is still framed and structured by higher instances and larger societal norms. Looking back on our dramaturgical approach of the social world, we can draw a parallel between the classroom environment and an improvisation theater. Teachers are the actors in

front of their audience of students, standing on a stage designed by the State and handling curriculum as props, acting towards a shared goal of education. Educators agree to play by the rules of the governments, but are willing to exercise their own agency whenever they sense dissonance between the broader framework and their personal principles (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2015, pp. 174-175). Teachers find themselves as the interpreters of the policies implemented from above in putting them into practice in the classroom. Through the example of the bans on gender inclusive language in both France and Germany, we observe the difference in the bold directivity on the part of the policy makers and the softer influence due to the inertia caused by the intermediacy of individuals and teachers, in the application of the regulations. Since educators are positioned as inevitable intermediaries between the two social groups of politicians and students, we deduce that political powers need to convince the teachers of the benefits and usefulness of their legislative propositions before they can reach students with them. Our analysis illustrates how the aforementioned bans have less of an effect on teaching practices than intended (Parkison, 2013, p. 23). This abstraction can also have a positive effect, where the heterogeneous identity of the teachers' group protects democracy, by not being subjected to specific party ideologies but by performing and reproducing common, baseline democratic values, offering a counter-power to shifting governments. With political mandates not always achieving the desired influence on classroom practices, identities and pedagogical performances are formed in close partnership between students and teachers.

Countries with similar educational purposes and similar cultural contexts, beginning with the European Union, could embrace a translated version of the same model, allowing for reflections on how to proceed with political mandates in education regarding their potential for effectiveness. In this sense, this research is centered on practical considerations more than academic conceptualizations (Tracy, 2010, p. 838). However, to comprehensively grasp the full scope of the school environment, further developments could address the students' perspectives on the teachers' responsibility in their own identity definition: does teachers' perceived influence extend as far as they believe?

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